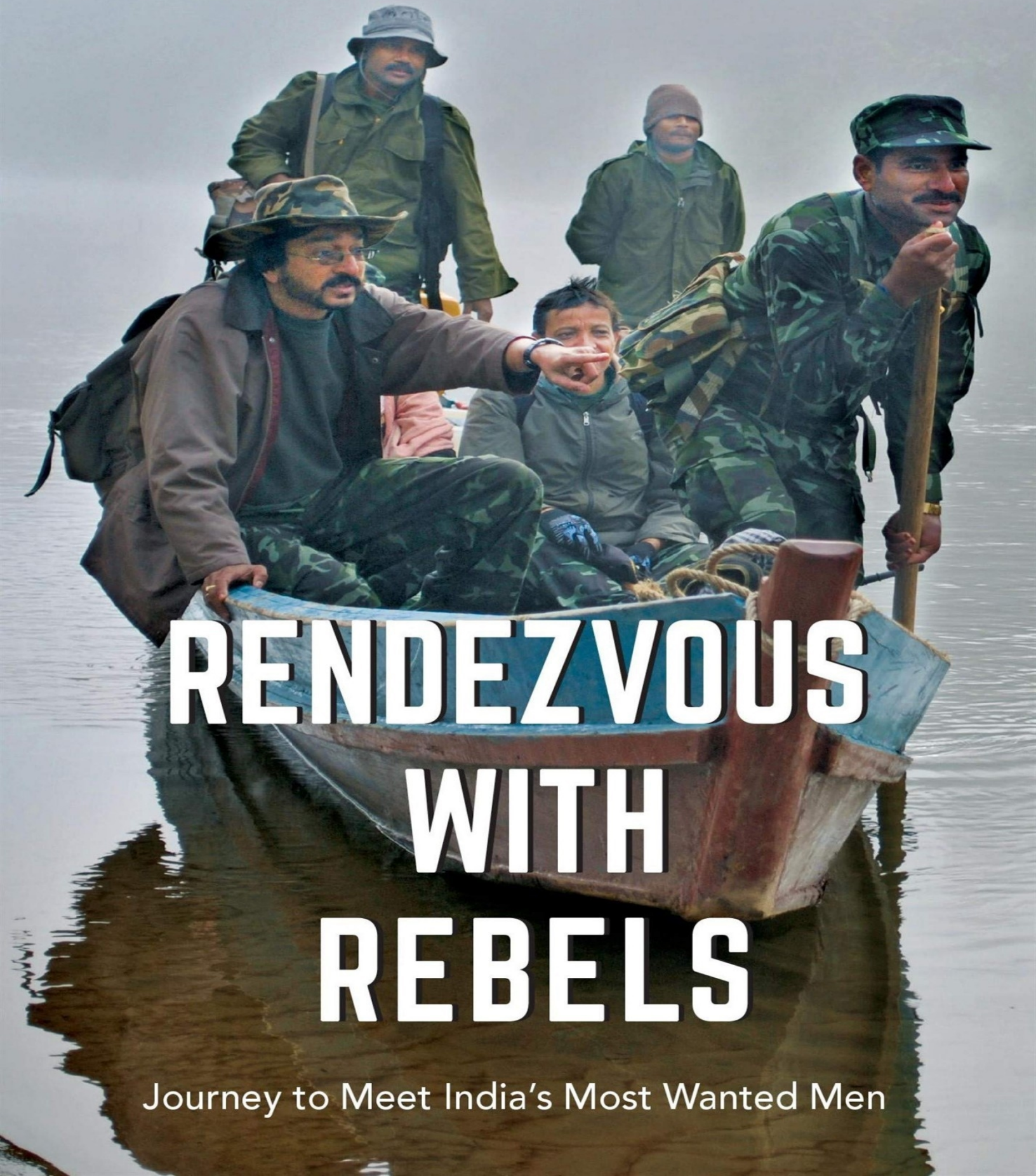
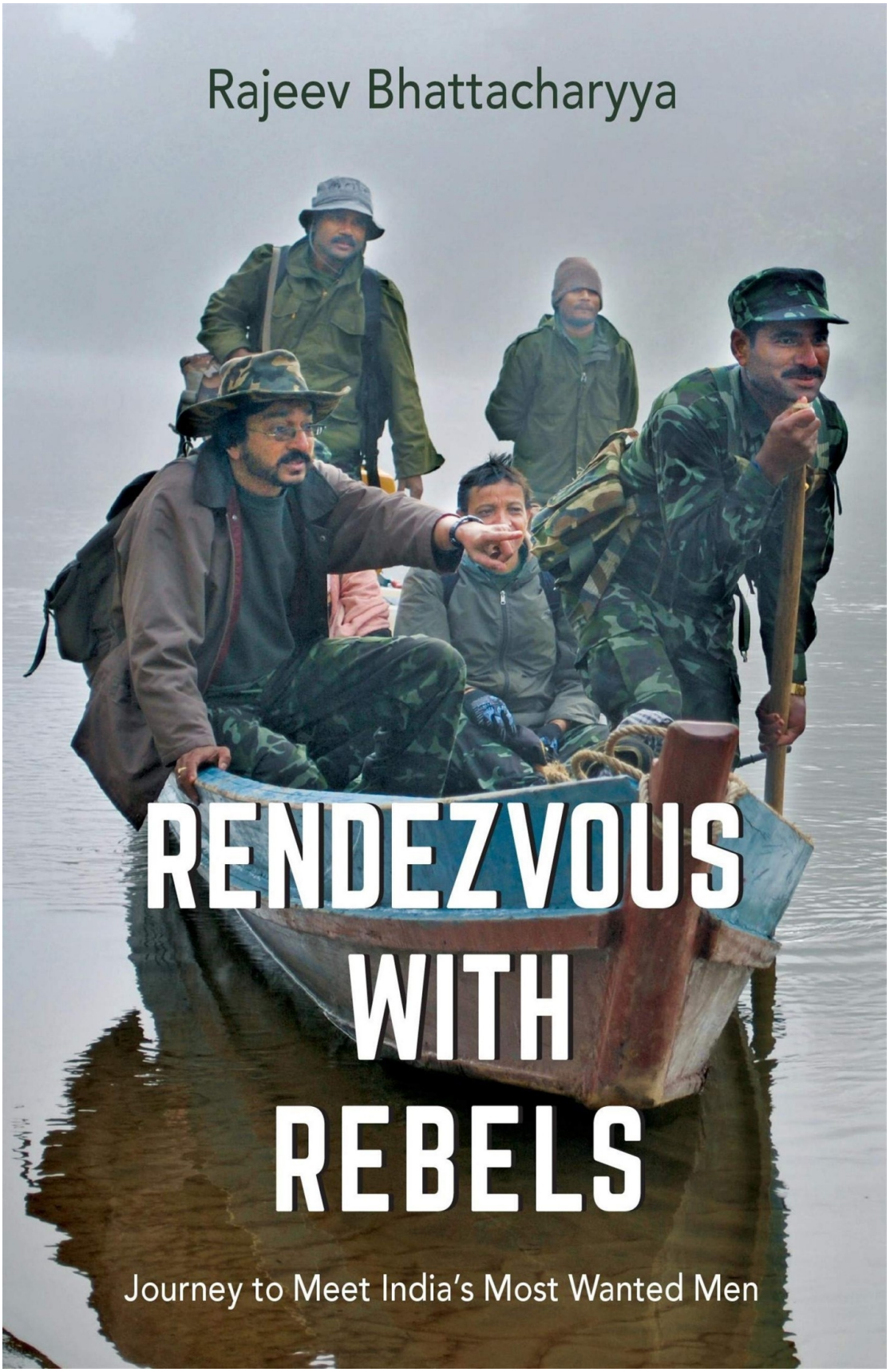
Rajeev Bhattacharyya



RENDEZVOUS WITH REBELS

Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men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Rendezvous with Rebels

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Author's Note

Before I set out on the journey to eastern Nagaland – the Naga-inhabited territory in western Myanmar – I knew it would be one of the toughest assignments in my journalistic career. And the repeated reminders from ULFA chief of staff Paresh Baruah had convinced me that it would be fairly dangerous. However, I did not imagine that I would be away for three months and twenty days, nor did I have the least inkling that the episode would snowball into a major controversy necessitating attention at the highest levels of the government. Something had gone awry somewhere and I was cursing myself for not having exercised sufficient caution. Subsequently, however, I was overjoyed, because the controversy yielded positive results and added more masala to this book as well. The assignment turned out to be an exciting tale of adventure, hazard, intrigue and, certainly, a great deal more than my expectations. When I returned, I felt compelled to write the story down, and finally completed the book that is now in your hands.

Everything in these pages is based on what I observed and assessed during the trek in eastern Nagaland that coincides with a part of Sagaing Division in Myanmar. I hope to convey the flavour of my own first-hand experience of a terrain, people and situations that are not easily accessible. Difficulty in access to a region or culture can result, among other factors, from unfamiliarity and harsh spatial circumstances. But my own situation was much more complex. My travel itinerary was subject to conditions determined by people in command over the region. This had a definite bearing on the reception and treatment I received throughout, but it was also this very uniqueness that enabled me to perceive everything in a new light about a region that is not only an unexplored frontier as such, but also carries tremendous significance for India.

Eastern Nagaland is next door to India's north-east. Its economic and social ties across the border have continued as in historical times, facilitated by the governments through trade and a policy called 'Free Border Regime'. As such, developments on one side are found to have a cascading effect on the other, for better or for worse. The contours of the separatist campaign in the north-east will depend much upon developments in eastern Nagaland, on whether the current situation continues or there is any change. This will also

determine the extent to which this underdeveloped tract will be opened up and amalgamated into the Look East Policy espoused by New Delhi. Too early to say, perhaps. There are cross-currents of subterfuge that are subtle and difficult to gauge. When the dots are connected, a hazy picture emerges that reeks of a fight for control of the region. Bits of these aspects have been delineated in the book without delving into details and without diluting the flavour of the chronicle.

Rendezvous with Rebels is not a conventional travelogue in the sense of description of the daily journey, nor is it a political disquisition. It describes the journey from the beginning to the end, zooming in and out at times and in places so as to delve into topics that merit elaboration and provide the reader with a more comprehensive view. I felt that this discourse would carry a greater import with a brief assessment of ULFA's movement so far, the mistakes it made and the reasons why the outfit stands where it does today. In the same vein, I considered it necessary to include a sub-chapter on the political developments in eastern Nagaland since its independence (1948) as it had not been recorded before. Therefore, analysis, historically contextualized whenever possible, has served as an important corollary in my representation. Information is extremely scarce on this region. Hence, while digging into history, some sources considered unbiased and objective have been widely quoted, such as the autobiography of the celebrated Naga rebel general Khole Konyak and a report on human rights published by Naga students in Myanmar. Likewise, I use dialogue at some places to capture the ambience of the moment, based on the notes I wrote during the evening after the day's trek.

We (my journalist colleague Pradip Gogoi and I) were taken to eastern Nagaland on the precondition that we would maintain secrecy on certain aspects. This was not unexpected as this is the modus vivendi with such assignments. We committed ourselves to the stipulations and conditions of our hosts, and continue to do so. As such, names of places have been deliberately left out and pseudonyms taken in some cases, especially for villages and their inhabitants. The region called eastern Nagaland has been depicted in the map, but I have refrained from marking the meandering route we took to reach the camp. I have also abstained from revealing the names of the ULFA cadres who assisted us during the journey, as well as details and timelines about certain episodes. In this regard, I wish to point out that ULFA chief of staff Paresh Baruah had asked us to mention eastern Nagaland as the

place where we had interviewed him. Upon my return, I did so in the news reports that were published in the newspaper I worked for and in some of the vernacular dailies. However, the chairman of NSCN(K), S.S. Khaplang, had no qualms mentioning Myanmar as the place where I had met him. It is now well known that we had been to Myanmar and not disclosing the fact would merely be ridiculous and confuse the readers.

Besides ULFA, another organization that I observed from close quarters was NSCN(K). It has been a vital factor in the sustenance of the separatist armed movements in India's north-east. The assignment would have been incomplete if I gained no insight into this outfit or returned without interviewing Khaplang, who has been associated with ULFA and the other rebel groups for the past three decades. I also wished to spend more time with some of the bigger Manipuri groups, but it was not possible. When it was time to pack our bags and return home, we had no choice but to leave. Nevertheless, my experiences and the information that I could gather were fascinating to say the least. They served to dispel preconceived notions and give a holistic view about a region and a movement against a tyrannical regime hardly known to the outside world.

There have been important developments in ULFA on both sides of the border after my return in early 2012. Arabinda Rajkhowa's group is now called the 'Pro Talk' ULFA and Baruah's identified as 'Independent'. In the narration, these tags have been done away with whenever the name of the organization has cropped up. Both groups still claim to be genuine and they justify their decisions and actions vis-à-vis the clauses in its Constitution.

This labour of love will have served its purpose if it creates a better understanding of these troubled regions, its people, its myriad separatist movements and contributes to the evolution of effective policies for peace.

Cast of Characters

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Paresh Baruah Chief of staff of the ULFA faction that continues to campaign for the independence of Assam and the north-east.

Arabinda Rajkhowa Chairman of the ULFA faction that is engaged in talks with the Indian government for a negotiated settlement.

Jibon Moran Second-in-command and the senior-most member of the ULFA faction that continues to fight for independence of Assam and the north-east.

Michael Deka Phukan ULFA officer who was in charge of the camp where we stayed in eastern Nagaland.

I.K. Songbijit Chairman of a faction of NDFB that continues to campaign for the independence of the north-east and Bodo-inhabited areas in Assam.

S.S. Khaplang Chairman of NSCN(K) and an ally of ULFA, NDFB and some rebel outfits of Manipur.

Joseph S.S. Khaplang's secretary.

Salim ULFA officer heading the group that was tasked with escorting us to the camp from the border.

Pranab ULFA officer heading the group that was tasked with escorting us during the return journey.

Bijoy Chinese Senior ULFA functionary who had come to receive us at some distance ahead of the camp.

Introduction

5 December 2009. The air in Guwahati was astir. Never before had such a huge crowd assembled to catch a glimpse of an arrested man. He had played a vital role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Assam for three decades. The organization he was part of was once considered the panacea to all ills afflicting both state and society. Like its other top functionaries, he had remained incognito for almost two decades, away from the prying eyes of the media and the intelligence agencies trying to keep tabs on him. Eventually, his luck ran out.

At half past five, as darkness fell, a heavily guarded convoy finally entered the premises of the chief judicial magistrate's court on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Dressed in a white shirt and dark trousers, with a grey muffler around his neck, the chairman of the banned United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Arabinda Rajkhowa, alighted from a van with his colleague and military spokesperson, Raju Baruah, and both were herded into the dimly lit corridors of the building. Camerapersons jostled to get their visuals, and a small group among the onlookers shouted slogans cheering the outfit. Half an hour later, Rajkhowa emerged and shouted to the crowd, 'We have not surrendered. We will never do so. There can't be talks with handcuffs.' The duo were then marched through a barricade, bundled into a vehicle and whisked away.

Some among the crowd speculated on the meaning of his words. If he hadn't surrendered, what would his fate be? What about talks with the government? Would he still support ULFA's chief of staff, Paresh Baruah, and the continuance of the armed campaign? And would Raju Baruah support Rajkhowa if he pitched for a negotiated settlement? Police prevented the television crew from getting any closer to the arrested leaders for more sound bites, and chased away the group that had shouted pro-ULFA slogans. The crowd slowly dispersed. Some huddled in corners to discuss the ramifications of the incident.

It was common knowledge that the ULFA was headquartered in Bangladesh. The speculation was that Rajkhowa and his colleagues had allowed themselves to be apprehended in Bangladesh and were later handed over to India. Rajkhowa and some of the other senior leaders were in favour

of talks with the government, but Baruah was opposed to this strategy. Furthermore, there had been a number of disagreements within the organization on major issues. The rift had widened with the failure of the ULFA to hold an executive council meeting for several years. Paresh Baruah and Rajkhowa had not met for quite some time before these arrests were made.

The chain of events leading to their apprehension is not clear, but curiously enough, the chairman, the foreign secretary (Shashadhar Choudhury), the finance secretary (Chitrabon Hazarika), the military spokesperson (Raju Baruah) and the rest were picked up by sleuths from different places in Bangladesh. After the pro-India Awami League swept to power in 2008, the ULFA rank and file knew their days in the country were numbered. The safer option was to relocate to the camps in Myanmar, but that would have meant crossing over to Arakan in Burma from Bangladesh, which entailed a month-long arduous journey through hundreds of kilometres of inhospitable terrain to Chin Province and then onward to Sagaing Division. The alternative was to fly to Yunnan in China, then slip through Kachin to the ULFA camps in the Naga-inhabited region. This would require a reliable network of contacts and, more importantly, it meant opting once again to live a hazardous life in the jungles and hills. The trajectory of the movement had already veered out of their control and their options were limited.

As expected, the chairman and his colleagues agreed to unconditional talks with the government a year after they landed in India, and were subsequently released from jail. For these men, a negotiated settlement did not mean compromising the demand for Assam's sovereignty. It was better to talk and wrest something from the government than chasing an unrealizable goal. A comprehensive charter of demands was placed before the government. They were supported by former ULFA cadres who had earlier come overground from camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Events moved at a quick pace thereafter. A general council meeting, convened early in 2011, unanimously decided to endorse the peace process with the government. Although Paresh Baruah was informed of the programme a week ahead, and asked to be present, he failed to turn up at the conclave.

Baruah had surreptitiously and expeditiously exited Bangladesh after being alerted by allies in the government. From an undisclosed location, he condemned the resolution approving the peace process, and accused the general council of being 'unconstitutional' and under the influence of the

'enemy (government)'. Baruah hinted that he would organize funds to rebuild a dedicated team along with loyal senior functionaries and reshape the organization for a renewed campaign similar to the efforts in the mid-1980s. However, this time, the ULFA had been split vertically, and perhaps with irreversible consequences – its journey had come full circle.

Insurgency engulfed Assam long after Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur had been set ablaze by separatists campaigning for independence. In Tripura, militants were also on a rampage against Bengali migrants for fear of being marginalized. The situation was not as bad in Assam, but there were strong undercurrents of alienation and frustration. For decades, even during the British rule, in fact, the indigenous population had been getting restive. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, hordes of Muslim peasants from Bangladesh (then East Bengal) were settled in Assam to enhance food production. The sparse population of the state and the partisan policies of as many as five governments headed by Sadullah (1937–46) in Assam further encouraged the movement and occupation of land by these settlers. In addition to this creation of imbalance in the population pattern, refugees from Bangladesh had also settled in Assam after Partition. The Centre ignored repeated pleas by the Assam government to shift a section of the immigrants to other states.

Perhaps no other prime minister misunderstood the sentiments and situation of this frontier region more than Jawaharlal Nehru. During the Chinese aggression, he assumed that the invading army would soon overrun the north-east, and is supposed to have commented on All India Radio: 'My heart goes out to the people of Assam.' It is not certain if he had actually meant it, but the damage was done. These words rattled Assam and reinforced the notion that for New Delhi, India did not exist beyond Siliguri. Compounding the situation were other blatantly biased decisions by the government within a brief span. In 1964, the refinery at Barauni was set up from crude oil pumped out of Assam even as agitations were rife demanding redressal of grievances. Five years later, the national flag was burnt in Guwahati.

Again, in 1971, while the rest of the country was basking in the afterglow of having successfully created Bangladesh, Assam took in at least a million refugees who had to escape the atrocities of the Pakistani army. According to the Government of India, there was still enough land available to occupy and settle down in Assam. Community grazing reserves and even reserve forests were encroached upon and colonized. Immigrants also managed to get hold

of essential documents like ration cards and even enrolled in the voters' list. The Janata Party–led coalition regime understood the gravity of the situation and Prime Minister Morarji Desai held discussions with Chief Minister Golap Borbora and senior officials about the immediate steps to be taken. However, his government was soon toppled and, some months later, the historic six-year agitation began in Assam against immigrants.

All of these events strengthened the separatist strand that had been discernible in Assam from pre-Independence days. Many were convinced that the path of violence was the only language that New Delhi would understand, and only through an armed campaign could their grievances be redressed. Many separatist groups were formed in the 1960s and '70s to take the agenda forward; to name a few, the Lachit Sena, Assam People's Liberation Army and United Liberation Front. Weapons in small quantities were procured from Manipur and Nagaland during the anti-foreigners agitation, there were a few bomb blasts, and railway tracks were blown up. But none of these outfits were enduring; unlike their Naga and Manipuri counterparts, not many were willing to go into the jungles and rough it out in camps.

It was against this backdrop that, in the early 1980s, two groups emerged in Assam – each holding the promise of being different from their predecessors: one at Sivasagar, the other at Dibrugarh. While Chairman Rajkhowa belonged to the former, Paresh Baruah and his cousin, Anup Chetia (who later assumed the role of general secretary in ULFA), were associated with the latter group. ULFA came into being with the merger of these two factions and included a few members from the earlier Assam People's Liberation Army (APLA), who were keen to work with more committed leaders. For the first few months, the entire focus was on establishing contact with the Naga separatist leaders for training and procuring arms. Once this was done, ULFA sent batches for further training to Kachin in northern Myanmar where a war was already in progress between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmarese army. Many perished en route; some from diseases and others succumbed to injuries after taking part in operations with the KIA. The offensive by the Indian Army in Assam did not yield the desired results during the initial stages, although rebel camps were dismantled and several middle-rung functionaries eliminated. By the early 1990s, bases had also sprung up in Bangladesh and Bhutan, an alliance was firmed up with Naga and Manipuri groups, and cadres were sent to the Afghanistan–Pakistan

(AfPak) border region for training under the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI).

ULFA continued to be a potent force throughout the 1990s. An uninterrupted flow of funds and weapons was ensured and the campaign for independence was taken up in international fora. But trouble began to brew after it was forced to leave Bhutan following Operation All Clear in late 2003. Bangladesh remained the only option to fall back on, but it came at a heavy price. It began to be dictated by ISI and a section of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), and ULFA was forced to indulge in senseless killings and bombings. Consequently, the outfit was impelled to change its tactics, which Baruah viewed as a necessary measure to survive and continue with the movement in Assam, even if the top functionaries in Dhaka disapproved. Meanwhile, in mid-2005, efforts were being made for dialogue with the Indian government. A group of interlocutors called People's Consultative Group (PCG) was formed under the Jnanpith winner Indira Goswami to prepare the ground, and a month-long ceasefire was declared. However, the process was deadlocked on the issue of Assam's sovereignty, which ULFA was keen to discuss, but New Delhi was not. With the government remaining inflexible in its stance, the talks could not move ahead. In Bangladesh, the anti-incumbency wave sweeping across the country brought the pro-India Awami League into power. It was apparent that ULFA's days were drawing to a close in the neighbouring country.

Paresh Baruah's whereabouts was anybody's guess when the spate of arrests began in Bangladesh. Nobody had any inkling about his location except for unconfirmed media speculations. What was certain, however, was that he would continue with the movement and possibly reconfigure the organization as he deemed fit since there was no one to oppose him. The senior-most member, Jibon Moran, was believed to be somewhere in Myanmar and had cast in his lot with the chief. General Secretary Anup Chetia was languishing in a jail in Dhaka, so his views did not matter for the time being. The question was, could Baruah pull it off again despite his advancing age? Hadn't ULFA's strength depleted severely over the years? It was also supposed to be reeling under a funds crunch. Where would the new cadres be trained? Going to Pakistan was no longer an option because flying out of Dhaka would not be permitted as long as the Awami League was in power. Furthermore, there were periodic reports of their Myanmar camps being regularly shelled by the army. Was ULFA planning to set up base in another country?

This journey was an attempt to gather answers to these questions.

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On the Trail

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The contrast in the view was stark. To our left was the dark vegetation of trees reaching the skyline above and to the right was a sheer drop into an abyss that seemed bottomless. The path we were trekking on had been deftly chiselled into the side of the hill and was taking us up a steady slope. Yet we were progressing cautiously and with deep misgivings, for the trail was leading to an unknown destination deep in the jungles ahead where the most wanted rebels from India's north-east had pitched tent. We were not supposed to ask our companions anything about the destination, route or duration of the journey. Our task was to march steadily, abide by the captain's instructions and inform him only if we had any problems.

Half an hour later, the climb became steeper and the track narrower. I was breathless and struggling to keep pace with the group, and so was my journalist colleague Pradip. An hour later, we reached the summit, and only then were we allowed to take a break and sit down for a while. In front of us was an undulating chain of hills, some big, some small, draped in a thin layer of mist. They stretched into the horizon as far as my eyes could see. The hills seemed to be crouched, guarding secrets. There were so many questions in my mind. Would we need to get across all the hills? How long would it take? Perhaps a few weeks or even months. I wanted to continue gazing at the breathtaking view until I could catch my breath, but the captain peremptorily ordered us to resume the march. It was against the rules of this particular expedition, but I was tired enough to request another five minutes.

The 'doctor' in the squad was staring at my shoes. He suggested I change them immediately because to him they didn't seem sturdy enough or lacked the grip to contend with the tough terrain. The team members were carrying an extra pair of 'hunter' shoes which they said were 'time-tested'. I heard the doctor out and nodded, but I had no intention of heeding his advice. My shoes were a famous American brand specifically designed for trekking, which I had specially shipped from the United States for assignments such as these.

They were comfortable, waterproof and thick-soled. After all, how many different brands of shoes had he seen in his entire life? What did he know about the technology and research that had gone into making this product?

From the peak, the path now cascaded down like a jagged staircase strewn with rocks and pebbles. I started on the descent and inadvertently placed my foot on a moss-covered rock and slipped. Somehow I managed to grab the branch of a tree just in time. Had I actually stumbled, I would have hurtled hundreds of metres down. After this, each step was placed after careful deliberation, sometimes clutching at shrubs, until the descent became, alarmingly, almost vertical. I stopped and decided that the only option was to sit and slide down as the captain suggested. I descended slowly. I managed to walk a short distance, and then had to slither down again. The captain, who was right behind me, suggested that I grab his hand whenever I needed support, which I did, frequently. But hazards come unannounced in the hills.

Negotiating the slight bend in the trail towards the right, I stepped on a loose rock on the ledge of the cliff. I lost my balance again, this time I fell, flailing as I desperately tried to grab something to break the fall. In free fall for a few seconds, I rolled twice and landed with a big thud on a jumble of shrubs and creepers below, then stumbled again and hit my chest hard on a small tree. I think I blacked out for a few seconds. There was blood oozing from a laceration below my right eye and several cuts and bruises. I stayed put until the captain and the doctor caught up and got a good hold on my hands.

'No, I am fine,' I protested, thoroughly ashamed of the situation I found myself in. 'You won't have to carry me.'

'Don't be discouraged. This happens with almost all newcomers,' the captain replied encouragingly as he helped the doctor open the first-aid kit.

'Only minor injuries, sir. Nothing to worry about,' the doctor pronounced.

My maroon shirt was flecked with blood. Although I thought I would need a stitch or two on my hand, the doctor merely smeared an ointment on the wounds and covered them with sticking plaster. As we sat there for a while, I saw the other three members of the team, including Pradip, looking down at us, wide-eyed and anxious. The drop was approximately the height of a two-storey building. I was still badly shaken, barely able to believe my luck. The ridge at this point had no rocks or big trees that could have killed me. What almost did kill me was my made-in-America shoe!

The question now was: how was I to climb back up? There was no rope.

The captain suggested that he make his way up and hold out a hand for me as I followed. The doctor positioned himself below to prevent me from sliding down again. On the way up, I slipped once but caught my grip back. Step by step, I clambered up, pulled from above and shoved from below, grasping the vegetation wherever possible for extra support. I placed my feet at precisely the same places where the captain had put his, which were either uneven surfaces or above the stems of sturdy plants. But it required practice and I wasn't as fast as him. The ten minutes it took me to get on the path again were among the most uneasy moments in my life that far. The team rested for a while until I was ready to resume the march in a single column.

An hour later, the captain raised his hand and we came to a sudden halt. What now? He informed us that we were about to enter a 'hazardous zone'. There was a stretch ahead that lay almost directly below an outpost of the Assam Rifles. Jawans often had their guns trained on the route as it was frequented by gun-toting rebels en route to and from their camps deep inside the jungle. In order to avoid mishaps, movement in this patch was usually done at night, he revealed, or in the afternoon when the personnel retired for their lunch break.

'So can we assume they are having a feast now? It's only noon,' I asked.

'Probably, but somebody could be lurking above with a pair of binoculars. We heard that a Manipuri group had a narrow escape last year,' the captain replied.

'So what should we do now? Wait?'

'No. We can scrape through safely, but follow the instructions carefully.'

We were to walk fast, avoid stopping or talking, and fall flat on the ground if necessary for the 500-odd metres that were wholly unsafe. Our positions were rearranged, and Pradip and I were placed in the middle with two people ahead of us and two behind. A gap of 10 metres was maintained between each person to prevent maximum damage. Even if a sniper were to take potshots, he would not be able to take aim at everybody and that would give the rest ample scope to duck for cover and dive to safety. For the moment, there were no more precipitous drops in the track. It was now on flat ground, but just as serpentine.

As we trotted on, keeping the captain's rules in mind, the eastern side of the outpost came into view above the thick green foliage. It seemed to be part of a fortress-like building housing a platoon of the paramilitary organization. I turned back and saw the doctor who gestured to me to walk faster. I looked

up once again, trying to spot the outpost, but it had vanished from view. I found it difficult to keep pace with the others as the trail again began a sudden ascent. Pradip's knees had begun to hurt, and he was sluggish as well. The two of us were gasping for breath and desperately wanted to sit for a few seconds, but that would jeopardize the entire group. It was imperative we carried on until we reached a safer zone. After about twenty minutes, we arrived at the next hill, out of the Assam Rifles' range. I settled myself comfortably beneath a tree and retrieved some water and glucose from my backpack.

'Now we can relax. We will reach a village in an hour, have food and then move on to another to stay for the night,' the captain announced.

'I am already very tired. When can we expect to reach the second village?' I asked anxiously.

'Not more than three hours if we march continuously. Everything depends upon you.'

I wondered if the entire journey would be as fraught with misadventures as the ones we had had so far. If the chances of survival hinged on sheer luck, it might prove to be too much of an adventure.

The captain assured us that there was nothing to be worried about 'for the time being'. But he would say no more when I asked him to elaborate, except that we would have to remain alert 24 x 7. What did he mean?

I armed myself with a bamboo staff for extra support. I was sure there would be treacherous terrain in the days ahead, steeper climbs and descents. Somebody had mentioned that we may need to travel under the cover of darkness through certain areas to avoid ambushes by the Myanmarese army. There was precious little we could do except exercise caution and be optimistic. I had been forewarned months ago about the perils of this journey and to reconsider several times over before taking the plunge. To my mind, assignments such as these came once in a lifetime. I had made my choice, and now there was no turning back.

Welcome to eastern Nagaland.

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I set foot in eastern Nagaland on 13 October 2011, two days after I began the journey from Guwahati. This region had fascinated me since childhood as a land of mystery – a land inhabited by wild tribes and rebels, a land where no government had been able to establish authority. Even the British colonizers were content to demarcate this tract and a few other regions in Myanmar as

‘unadministered’. I never dreamt that I would one day venture here myself, not least at the invitation of the banned United Liberation Front of Asom and to interview its chief of staff Paresh Baruah.

My ambition to interview the ULFA leaders, including its chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa was conceived sometime in the mid-1990s, soon after I began my stint as a journalist in New Delhi. The leaders of the separatist groups were notoriously elusive, and I craved to do something that others hadn’t been able to. The plan had remained on the back burner for a long time as I went about various other assignments. In 2001, I met an ULFA functionary during a visit to Guwahati (I was still based in Delhi back then) and I requested him to take me to a camp in Bhutan to meet the leaders. He told me that this would only be possible on ULFA’s Raising Day (7 April) when most of them flew down from Dhaka, and promised to try and arrange this.

Around July, he sent a message saying that although none of the leaders were willing to be interviewed at this juncture, he would take me to the outfit’s general headquarters in southern Bhutan. Was it safe, though? I had never been to a rebel camp before. Yes, he said, since there were no security forces on their secret routes. I accepted the proposal and, three months later, landed at Darranga Mela on the border between Assam and Bhutan. The camp was about a day’s walk from the border. However, my contact functionary was nowhere to be seen, so I retired to a nearby village and stayed the night at a friend’s house. The next day, I did meet my contact but he refused to take me on because the situation had turned volatile. I returned home heavy-hearted, more determined now than ever to visit the camp and conduct my interviews.

There was little scope of pursuing my plans further in New Delhi where I was beginning to get bored with the rigmarole of routine reporting. Meanwhile, following an operation by the Royal Bhutan Army in 2003, the camps in Bhutan were demolished. Nevertheless, I managed to get in touch with Paresh Baruah by telephone, and he responded to an emailed questionnaire about the collapse of the month-long ceasefire between the government and the ULFA. The interview was published on 25 September 2006 in the national daily that I worked for.[1] My return to Guwahati in 2007 as the chief of bureau of a TV news channel helped me continue the interaction with him occasionally, but my efforts to talk to Rajkhowa, who I knew was in Bangladesh, failed.

Towards the end of 2009, a glimmer of hope resurfaced. Baruah called me, and I managed to ask him a few questions. With his permission, I recorded his responses on my cell-phone and telecast it on the news channel I then worked for.[2] I also broached the topic of a face-to-face interview with him. He agreed to meet me, but said I would need to wait until conditions were more conducive. I was certain this would not be in Bangladesh since the pro-India Awami League had come into power and a crackdown on the north-east militants had already begun.

But, if not Bangladesh, then where? Either in some foreign capital or perhaps in some remote location where ULFA camps may have mushroomed. Baruah was one of the most wanted men in India, relentlessly pursued by the government for over two decades; the Interpol had also issued a red corner notice against him. All his movements were, therefore, extremely circumspect. There were reports in the media that Baruah had landed in the jungles somewhere along the Sino-Myanmar frontier that was beyond the jurisdiction of the Myanmarese government. Should I venture to undertake such an assignment at all? Still, no harm in angling for it; a final decision could always be postponed to the last minute.

A breakthrough of sorts came the following year when the chief spoke to me again and assured me that he would meet me sometime the following year. Weeks turned into months and there was no further progress. As I had been sworn to secrecy, I could not discuss the matter with anybody to gather inputs about the location to which I might be invited. Finally, on 16 April 2011, the jinx broke. Baruah's voice, which had now become familiar to me, crackled on my cellphone early one morning and we chatted for almost half an hour. We discussed an entire range of issues from the current situation in Assam and the north-east, to the growing clout of China in world affairs.

It was now or never if I was to clinch the interview. 'I hope you remember your commitment. I have been waiting for you to give me a date so that I can begin preparing.'

'Of course, I remember. But are you really serious?' he asked, and added, 'It will be a very tough and perilous journey.'

'I'm willing to take the risk. I'm fed up of churning out news stories from air-conditioned rooms.'

'OK then. Sometime in October, after the monsoons. It is not advisable to come now,' he spoke uncharacteristically fast, and continued, 'Please remember that you should not discuss this with anybody; your security could

be jeopardized. I will get in touch with you in due course. In the meantime, I suggest you start your exercise regiment right away. Run every day and try to walk in the hills. And let me repeat: it is going to be risky and tough for you.' With that, he hung up.

I plunged headlong into my workout routines, walking and doing asanas every morning. They helped a lot, although I think I could have done better if I had practised walking on a hilly terrain. Next, I briefed my journalist colleague Pradip Gogoi, who worked for a local TV news channel, about the imminent journey. We had vowed long ago that we would make the trip to the ULFA camp together. I was not sure if ULFA would allow another journalist to accompany me. But I emailed Baruah, and he agreed. Pradip and I then met up in Guwahati to put together a list of everything we might conceivably need on our trip. I insisted on total secrecy as any leakage could upset our plans.

In July came a long mail from Baruah clearly specifying the dos and don'ts for the trip. 'Be a Roman when in Rome, and be prepared for a long haul of at least two months,' the email said at the outset. 'Never take out your camera anywhere or reveal that you are journalists as this would endanger you and everybody escorting you. For security reasons, you will not do anything or go anywhere without the permission of the senior officer in charge of the group. Do not ask the name of any place or village that you pass through. Do not misbehave or be rude to any villager. You will have to eat whatever is served to you although our cadres will take care to ensure that you do not face problems of any kind …'

The instructions did not seem too difficult. I shot back a response in a few minutes, requesting him to send a group of four or five people to receive us so that we would not have to carry the heavy backpacks on hilly trails. All essential items were gathered by the end of September – two rucksacks, medicines for common ailments and malaria, glucose, the dehydration-fighting Electral powder, two shirts and two pairs of pants, inner garments, extra pairs of spectacles and trekking shoes, mosquito net, sleeping bag, slippers, toiletries and a few gifts. In the third small bag that I would carry myself, was Rs 20,000 wrapped in polythene and put inside a wooden box containing the voice recorder. I also slipped in a camera and its accessories, a khukri, water bottle, raincoat, torch, lighters, biscuits, pens and two notebooks. Finally, two weeks before departure, we took vaccinations against tetanus and typhoid. In spite of all the meticulous preparation, I forgot kneepads and anti-insect spray, for which I would pay a heavy price.

An email from Baruah in the last week of September stated that the schedule had been advanced by two weeks, and that we would begin our journey in the second week of the following month. Another message arrived a week later, directing us to a spot on 12 October. We would then need to contact an elderly man, John, who would take us to the next location. An ULFA squad would receive us at an undisclosed point. I was now sure that we were heading to Myanmar. There were regular reports of ULFA's presence in that country, along with Naga and Manipuri rebel groups. But where? How could the assignment possibly be accomplished within two months if we were to trek all the way into the Sino-Myanmar frontier? In the late 1960s, Naga guerrillas took over three months to complete the trek from Nagaland to China's Yunnan Province, and Mizo rebels even longer. Perhaps there were roads now and we would be taken in vehicles.

I left home a day ahead and stayed the night in a town in upper Assam where Pradip, carrying a single backpack, joined me. The next day, we picked up John and headed for a village near the Indo-Myanmar border. After an hour or so, John's cellphone buzzed, and he asked the driver to stop the jeep. He looked worried.

'The Assam Rifles have reached the village. Are you willing to take the risk?' he asked.

I decided there was no question of turning back. Moreover, people in my line of work were allowed access almost everywhere, even this village. 'Yes, we will go ahead. We will say we are journalists.'

'OK. But you will have to prove that you are here on an assignment in case we do bump into them. You will also have to establish that you are not an ULFA activist and don't intend to cross the border.'

We agreed. However, as we had neither identity cards nor documents to substantiate our claim, our departure would surely be delayed if we were interrogated. It could even be splashed in the media that two journalists were apprehended trying to cross the border without valid documents. We would then be back to square one and have to start from scratch all over again, probably after several weeks, and use an entirely different route which could be hundreds of kilometres away in another state. The vehicle was again halted about a kilometre before the village, while John spoke to somebody on his cellphone. We were glad to see his face brighten. He told us there were fifteen personnel who had come for patrolling and were now drinking merrily at the house of the village headman.

At 9.30 p.m., we diverted from the highway to an ascending track that brought us straight to the village. The jeep halted at a point where we found an elderly man waiting for us. John conversed with him in the local language for a few minutes and then turned to us.

'My work is done. From here he will take you to another destination tomorrow,' John said softly, an arm around the other man's shoulders.

The driver unloaded our bags from the jeep.

'Thank you. Will you be able to accommodate my driver at a safe place for the night?' I asked. Our other option was to keep the driver and jeep with us, but that would have been risky, as the jeep would be conspicuous and bound to raise suspicions.

'I will keep him with me, and good luck. Don't come out of the hut without the host's permission,' John said as he shook hands with us. 'And drop in at my place when you return and give me your hat as a gift.'

'That's a promise', I replied

Pradip and I watched the jeep vanish from sight as stealthily as it had come.

The hamlet was quiet once again. Nothing moved. In the darkness, all that I could discern were small and big huts all around on an uneven terrain and the faint contours of hills at a distance, probably at its southern and eastern flanks. Our host conversed with us in Nagamese and invited us into his hut. It was lit up dimly by the fireplace at the centre of the room. The two people, who were probably his guests as well, stared at us as we carried our luggage into the adjacent room. There were two wicker beds kept ready with a blanket on each.

'You will be woken up at 3 a.m., and we will leave after an hour while it is still dark,' our host reminded us curtly. He asked us to join him and his friends by the hearth.

'But why in the dark?'

He looked straight into my eyes. I'm not sure what he was thinking, but his response worried us. 'We will have to dodge two layers of patrolling by the Assam Rifles.'

'Two layers of patrolling? Well … but what if we are apprehended?'

'I don't know. Let's just hope for the best.'

I assumed that he knew the movements of the patrolling parties and was, therefore, more optimistic than we were. The group that had arrived in the village was unlikely to walk their beats before 5 a.m., he said. The challenge was at the border where another squad was keeping vigil. Its unpredictable

schedule had gaps that we must take advantage of. We went to bed after a dinner of rice, chillies and boiled herbs, and watched our host and his guests take deeply appreciative puffs of kani (opium) from a long bamboo pipe. The British Raj was no more, but its legacy still remained in nooks and corners, I thought, as I drifted into sleep.

Early next morning, I was awakened by two men who were whispering furtively by my bed. They had machetes in their hands and were taking away our rucksacks. I grabbed the khukri and leapt out of bed, only to realize they were porters summoned from the village to carry our bags. It was 3.30 a.m., and our host offered us green tea and roasted maize. That done, we were to prepare for the march. At 4.15 a.m., we started walking while it was still dark, on a dilapidated concrete road that went up straight to the border, about 4 kilometres from the village. There were three men in all, including the host, and each toted a rucksack, accompanying Pradip and me. I couldn't shine my torch for security reasons. But we did fine without it, because the concrete was pale white and the road broad enough for a vehicle to pass. Soon the trio surged ahead and urged us to walk faster.

After half an hour, faint streaks of light appeared on the horizon. I stopped for a few seconds and observed the surroundings. A string of hills appeared to my left, right and front, some wooded and some that seemed to have been partially stripped of its green cover. Smoke billowed at a distance, perhaps from a patch burnt for jhum cultivation. The village we had just left was perched at the midpoint of the hill that appeared smaller from the place that we had now reached. The road we were traversing wound upwards in a gradual ascent and disappeared into the adjacent hill. Through years of neglect, the concrete had gradually disintegrated, and all that remained was rubble. Pradip reminded me that we were still in the 'danger zone' and that we ought to catch up with the three men who were now practically out of sight. We had been remiss and forgotten what the host had said last night.

Although we did try, we could only marginally improve our speed. A few minutes past 8 a.m., we saw our host waiting for us at a bend in the road and waving to us to speed up. When we reached him, he explained that his friends would have to return to attend to their daily chores at home after dropping us at our destination. They had, therefore, decided to forge ahead and not wait for us, and we could catch up with them soon or see them when we arrived at the end of this lap of our journey.

'From here,' he continued, 'we will leave the road and proceed through the

jungle. We will have to be very cautious and I will move with you.' He asked us to move faster on a particularly perilous stretch – a platoon of Assam Rifles had a camp nearby, which sent out regular patrols to the area after 9 a.m.

We stepped into a dense copse of trees and creepers in the hillside to the left and finally arrived at a narrow rocky trail. It was dark in the woods as we began the ascent, following the host who would often stop and wait for us to catch up with him. Streaks of sunlight shot through the gaps in the overarching branches above us, but the rays hardly ever reached the ground below. By 9.30 a.m., I was panting, and desperate for a break. I stopped for a while, gasping, and asked the host if there was still a possibility of the Assam Rifles apprehending us.

'No, we have crossed that area. No problem now,' he replied.

'OK. In that case, can we sit down for a while?'

'Sure, but don't delay too much. I too need to return to my basti by afternoon.'

So, the first hurdle had been overcome; we had managed to scrape through without being noticed. This was how the militants continued to function all these decades in spite of the heavy deployment of the security forces. Not every inch of the border can be guarded and a fence was unfeasible in such a terrain. I wanted to know our precise location.

'But are we still in India?' I asked again.

The host, who was enjoying a bidi, stared at me uncomprehendingly because he did not know the answer. The line dividing India and Myanmar was blurred here and carried no meaning for the locals. They were allowed by their respective governments to visit the other side up to a distance of 16 kilometres under a system called 'free border regime'.

As we got up to walk, he replied that we were in a 'secured zone'.

Secured zone? What was that? I asked him but there was no answer. Perhaps we had entered the region so famously called 'no-man's-land' because no government has ever been able to establish its authority in the area. And it also explained the host's statement that we were safer and had crossed the area of Assam Rifles. And we soon appreciated the full flavour of what he had meant.

After fifteen minutes, two teenage boys in jungle fatigues, appeared from nowhere and asked us to stop. Three others peered at us wide-eyed, the grey-black barrels of their AK-47 rifles protruding through the thick creepers. The

host whispered something into their ears and we were allowed to proceed. For the next two hours we trudged up and down without much effort. We were again halted at a checkpoint manned by young cadres in the same attire and similar weapons. The leader of the group took out his radio transmitter and mumbled something in code. He informed us in Nagamese that we would be allowed to proceed further only after we got the approval from the commander of the camp we were headed to.

His accent resembled that of the Bodo from Assam. The functionary's face brightened when I introduced myself as an ULFA activist hailing from Guwahati. I could not introduce myself as a journalist since Baruah had strictly forbidden it. He indeed was a Bodo, and was associated with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which also had camps in the region. He said he had joined the outfit three years ago and had been mainly based in eastern Nagaland, moving between the various camps. After half an hour, a message on the radio permitted us to continue our trek.

At 12.15 p.m., we entered the gates of what appeared to be the biggest rebel camp I had ever seen. It was a sprawling, but neat, settlement of huts, offices, barracks and parade grounds, sloping down to the foothills. The construction was almost entirely of bamboo with either thatch or tarpaulin sheets for the roofs. Cadres were running errands, fetching firewood and water, some marching to the orders of commanders and some cooking food. Tall trees and shrubs sparsely dotted the entire settlement that stretched for more than 200 metres. I surmised that the stream, which gurgled below and meandered through the gaps between the blue-green hills facing the camp, was flowing southwards.

Our bags were placed inside a hut, which had three beds with sheets and blankets. Clothes, old calendars and handwritten documents hung on the wall, and there was a fireplace in the middle. Our two escorts who had gone ahead had arrived at the camp well ahead of us, and were now ready to set off on the journey back home. The trip with us had upset their daily schedule, and they would certainly have lost almost an entire day by the time they got back. Pradip and I sat on two broken plastic chairs and observed the activities silently. Nobody bothered to question or talk to us. Two cadres with United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK) emblazoned on the pockets of their green shirts walked past our hut. They belonged to a rebel group in Manipur. The activities of the campsite had the immediate effect of restoring our energy levels after the exhausting trek.

I had been hearing about this camp for more than a decade from the functionaries of various separatist groups. It belonged to the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, NSCN(K), and the autonomous government it claimed to have established in the Naga-inhabited areas of India and Myanmar: Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN). It was an old and trusted ally of many a rebel outfit in India's north-east, including the ULFA, NDFB and many others from the Imphal Valley of Manipur. The cadres based at this centre were from various organizations. They all wore green, but each distinctive shade of the colour represented a different separatist group.

Entry into and movement in this region was possible only after the approval of the NSCN(K) president, S.S. Khaplang. Although we were not entirely hopeful, we hoped to interview him and the other rebel leaders as well whose camps were reportedly close to the ULFA's.

'So I think we have finally landed in eastern Nagaland. What do you think?' I asked a bemused-looking Pradip.

'Are you sure? Well this definitely looks like a combined camp of many rebel outfits beyond the reach of the Indian security forces,' he replied.

'Of course. Assam Rifles is not very far, but this must be out of their jurisdiction. Do you think they would sit around twiddling their thumbs otherwise, with so many rebels in their vicinity?'

'But can anybody give us some idea about how far we are supposed to go from here?'

'No', I said, alarmed. 'We cannot ask anybody anything. I presume we should reach the camp by the end of the month if we begin marching from tomorrow.'

But where were the ULFA boys who were supposed to receive us? We had no answer to that. Were we supposed to travel alone up to a certain point? In which direction were we to proceed? We could not ask anybody lest our identity be revealed. We decided to wait until the next day and then take a decision. For now, we were extremely hungry. There was a fireplace, pots and pans in a corner of the barrack. Wasn't it time for dinner? A majority of the rebel camps I had visited served only two meals – once in the morning at 7 a.m. and the next around 2 p.m. Their day began very early before sunrise and so they went to bed early in the evening. I lay down on a bed for a while, when a Naga lad in his late teens barged in.

'So you have finally come. I was informed in the morning that I would have

to accommodate two guests. You are ULFA, aren't you?' he asked in Nagamese.

'Yes.'

'How long will you be here?'

'If everything goes according to plan, we will leave for another destination tomorrow.'

'You must be hungry now. I will prepare something in half an hour,' he announced, as he hung his M-16 rifle sling on the wall and unhooked the belt that carried four magazines.

I smiled and shook hands with him. We were relieved and would have been happy even if we only got plain rice. It was more than that. He poured rice and water into a saucepan, squash and salt into another and hopped out of the hut to get firewood. I ate more than my usual quantity, entirely aware that there would not be another meal until the next morning. I conversed with the boy, who it turned out, hailed from the Konyak tribe in Nagaland. He had been to school for only five years before he decided to join NSCN(K) a year ago. He informed us that there were cadres belonging to five different rebel groups in this camp, including a few from Manipur. There were other campsites as well in the vicinity, within a radius of 5 kilometres.

There was a sudden drop in temperature as the sun went down. I walked around the camp, passed by the barracks and officers' chambers to the stream below, only to find our host already there washing clothes. He enquired about the place we were headed to, and burst out laughing when I replied that we were to be taken to a camp at a distant location.

'Are you sure you will be able to walk that far in the hills? You live in the plains, don't you?' he said mockingly. Then, as he got up to leave, he asked me not to loiter by the brook for too long.

I was deeply worried. If we can't make it to the end, even setting out for the assignment would be foolhardy. Or was he just trying to scare us? But since we were on our way already, we would not give up without at least trying.

I sought to gather information about the journey from the boy. 'Is it really very tough?'

He only glanced at me and chuckled. I wanted to ask him some more questions but he was already climbing the rough stairs leading up to the camp. As I followed him up, an elderly Naga officer raised his hand, and signalled that I should come up to his hut, close to ours. Before he asked me anything, I explained I was a senior ULFA functionary from Dibrugarh

waiting to be taken to a meeting at a different camp. Shortly afterwards, I reached our hut and sat outside on the chair. With nothing else to do, I prepared to go to bed after dark. I took out the sleeping bag and tried to pull a fast one with the Naga boy. I saw a blanket on his bed and suggested that he swapped his bed and blanket for my sleeping bag. He accepted, and was soon comfortable, in deep slumber, and snored through the night. The icy winds pierced through the thin bamboo walls of the hut and kept me up all night long. I twisted and turned in vain trying to get warm. It was only in the wee hours that I fell asleep – but only for a couple of hours. Somebody shook me awake. A cadre who looked like a Naga was staring wide-eyed at me.

'Sir, four ULFA men have come to meet you.'

'Where are they?' I asked.

'They are having food and will be here to meet you shortly. So please get up and get ready,' he said, and left as quickly as he had come in.

Pradip was awake and looking at me. Our worries were over. We knew we were on the right track. I dozed off to sleep again. I knew that a hectic schedule was about to begin in a few hours.

2

Hills Come Alive

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After an hour or so, four heavily armed cadres attired in jungle fatigues arrived at the hut. Leading the group was a tall, tough, bearded officer in his mid-forties. The others were younger, possibly in their early thirties.

'Sir, good morning. We have come to take you. We are sorry that we could not come yesterday,' the officer said, shaking hands with us. He identified himself as Captain Iqbal and introduced us to his associates: 'doctor' Bora, Rathin and Bijit.

'I am Rajeev, and this is my friend, Pradip. I think you have already been briefed about us.'

'Yes, but not much. We have been tasked to take you to the camp safely.'

'OK. We were very confused yesterday because we didn't see you here when we arrived. In fact, we were planning to meet the commander of the camp today to discuss our journey.'

'He knows you are here but was a bit circumspect. He could not believe that you dodged the Assam Rifles and reached this place without any problems,' Iqbal said with a chuckle. 'He will come to see us off.'

The 'doctor' who was listening silently chipped in, and informed us that all the necessary medicines, including injections, were in the bag that he was carrying. His task, seemingly the toughest in the group, was to ensure that we did not fall sick, and reached our destination hale and hearty. We were both elated and reassured. I tried to figure out the extent of his knowledge of medicine. Was he a qualified MBBS? He clarified that he wasn't, but he did possess knowledge of all common diseases and their treatment. A few doctors in Assam who were sympathizers of the ULFA had trained him years ago. To be precise, he was the sort of medic usually found in the big militant camps who treated the cadres. But would he actually know more than treating bullet wounds and common injuries? What would happen if we were to be afflicted with some serious ailment?

'Please be frank,' Pradip said. 'Do you think we can make it? We have

been hearing discouraging stories about the terrain here.'

Iqbal profoundly assured us that the trek was not as tough as it was made out to be. All that we would need was the 'determination' that we would make it, and pointed out that hundreds of cadres who were physically unfit had passed through this route. Once, he recalled, there was a 'super heavyweight' guy, who could not even walk properly, but he too made it, albeit panting every step of the way.

We bonded well with the squad and loosened up enough to even crack jokes. I had heard about Iqbal five years ago as one of the confidants of chief of staff, Baruah. He had joined ULFA two decades earlier after passing out of school, and had accompanied the chief on important assignments, including a few countries in Europe. I was startled that a senior person like him had been sent to receive us, which in itself spoke volumes of the importance accorded to our visit. Although Iqbal was a reservoir of information, he was guarded about everything he said. Soon, he served us the meal of rice and boiled vegetables that had been prepared earlier by one of the Naga boys. As we ate, he briefed us on the dos and don'ts during the journey. He reiterated Baruah's dictum that we were not to disclose our actual identities anywhere. Henceforth, we were to be senior ULFA functionaries en route to a meeting, and we were not to go anywhere without their permission or speak to anybody unnecessarily when we halted for the night. We were also to keep in mind Baruah's emailed instructions sent to me quite some time ago.

I assumed the name Captain Nipen Das who had been in ULFA for over two decades. We finished our packing and were ready to hit the trail within half an hour. The plan for the day, Iqbal said, was to reach a village in the afternoon for a light meal, then continue hiking until we reached another settlement by nightfall and stay there for two nights. All the bags would have to be unpacked, items rearranged and foodstuff gathered from the village for the journey ahead. There would be a machete, lighter, raincoat, medicines, water and 500 grams of rice in the individual bags that each of us would carry ourselves. But rice? For what? Extra quantities would be taken in any case in the big collective bags.

'When you move in this region, you must have a contingency plan ready in case of a crisis,' Bora said. 'Do you understand now, sir?'

I did. In case of any untoward incident, we may need to venture deep into the jungle for safety and remain holed up for days. This happened sometimes

when the Myanmarese army raided a village or remained stationed in an area through which the route passed. But for how long? Were these common occurrences here? I queried.

'Not really. Our network is quite efficient and we will be warned well in advance so that we can move to safer places,' he replied.

'Can I make a request please? If you ever feel that the Myanmarese army might apprehend us, please shoot me before that happens. I would rather die instantly than be tortured for two weeks before being killed,' I said, immediately attracting everybody's attention. Did I say something wrong? 'Although I know that won't happen … but just in case … '

'Not to worry, sir. We will all reach safely,' Iqbal replied.

I was equally concerned about drinking water. Years ago, I had come down with jaundice twice, and, ever since, I have been extra-careful with whatever fluid I drank. There were horror stories about cadres dying on their way to training camps in Kachin. I did not want to take any chances – in this region, it would surely mean death. If not death, at least, disease and delays in the assignment. My anxieties were allayed when I was told that boiled water would be made available every morning. Other sources were resorted to only in dire emergencies. Soon Bora took our plastic bottles and filled them with boiled water from the adjacent barrack. As we got ready to leave, the commander of the camp came to our hut escorted by two armed cadres. The group stood up and saluted him. He spoke to us for a few minutes and wished us good luck for the journey. A typed note was handed over to Iqbal mentioning that we had permission from the NSCN(K) to pass through the region. The note would come in handy if we were to need any assistance from Naga cadres.

We stepped out of the camp on to a circuitous trail that led us up the hill. Our three rucksacks were carried by three people, excluding Bora, who toted his heavy bag of medicines and the first-aid kit. They immediately became overloaded as they had their own individual bags and weapons to carry. Iqbal and Bora carried a 9 mm pistol each while the younger duo had AK-81 assault rifles dangling from their shoulders and magazines wrapped around their waists. We stopped for breaks at regular intervals, after every thirty minutes of walking, until the trail began a downward slide with sharp twists and turns. I did not realize just how treacherous the slippery edges were and that extreme caution would be needed while negotiating such a trail.

My stumble and fall taught me much, though. An hour later, I abandoned my

American shoes in favour of the 'hunter' shoes at a village where we stopped for a light meal of rice and dried fish. It felt like I was walking barefoot, but I realized I was more sure-footed now and, at the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

From the village, the path was wide and well marked, but it had sharper drops. It led to a stream below that would have to be crossed for the subsequent phase of the track that went up to the next village. Eventually, as we trekked downhill, we saw our next destination, a village high up on the opposite hill. It seemed to be only half a kilometre or so away. However, that distance would be as the crow flies and the zigzagging track was a different story altogether. Around 4 p.m., as daylight started to fade, we set foot on a bamboo bridge craftily woven to ferry people across the swirling stream that flowed with the intensity of a fast-paced river.

'Dear all, some rest please, if you don't mind,' I shouted.

'Yes, that's fine,' Iqbal agreed. 'We can always stop whenever you want, provided there is no security threat.'

A little ahead, I stopped, worried stiff. A sheer cliff stared us in the face. There were rough rocks protruding from this wall, and those would provide footholds for us. But it was quite a distance to the top. A slip here would prove more dangerous than my fall that morning. I turned to Pradip, who seemed equally aghast. The other members of our team appeared wholly unconcerned. I found their apparent callousness upsetting. We were not guerrillas – they could have at least brought a rope along for such a terrain.

Iqbal, sensing my apprehension, reached for my hand. 'It hasn't been raining, so it isn't slippery. You will make it just as the rest of the newcomers did. Do not be afraid. Both of you are much better than the guys who came some months ago, and they all made it successfully,' he reassured me. Don't place your foot at one place for too long, and put the pressure on your heels as you climb, he advised. He went up first and held out his hand for me to grab and follow suit. Bijit, Pradip, Bora and Rathin were to follow.

We inched our way up the precipice over the next half an hour. Although I slipped twice, I didn't fall, which is, of course, why I live to tell this tale. Pradip fared somewhat better. There were earlier occasions – once at Chandel in Manipur and the other at Assam's Dima Hasao – when I had had to climb hills on my way to militant camps, but those were neither as high nor steep. Here, even after we were done negotiating the cliff, we had to hold on to creepers and rocks every step of the way. We landed on a lean meandering

track after an hour or so, and flopped down on the ground to restore our energy levels. The gradient was less steep now, but even then Pradip and I continued to walk at a snail's pace. It was simply impossible to keep pace with the ULFA cadres who were used to the terrain. I sensed the unease Bora and Bijit felt at having to walk this slowly – even though they were the ones carrying heavy loads on their backs – but there was precious little we could do to improve the situation.

It was dark by the time we heard a faint shout from the village. I don't remember feeling quite so exhausted before. At one point, my body simply refused to move any further. 'Can I just sleep here for the night? Forgive me, but I can't move further,' I told Iqbal as I slumped under a tree.

'Sir, we have reached. I assure you it's no more than fifteen minutes from here and we will go very slowly.' He offered to carry my bag, but he was already fully loaded and so I declined.

I got up and began walking forward guided by the bright beam of my torchlight. Three ULFA cadres from the village had hurried forward to receive us. I gratefully surrendered my bag to one of them, hoping it would improve our pace; it did not. It was past 7 p.m. when we finally entered the wooden gates of the village and stepped on to a path sloping downhill towards flat ground. In the darkness, I could vaguely make out long rows of thatched houses that were much smaller than those in the village across the border. But why was the village so silent? Perhaps everybody had already gone to sleep.

We headed to a hut in the centre of the settlement, where an ULFA cadre in his late forties, who identified himself as Gyanesh Bharali, was waiting to receive us. Bone-weary, I shook hands with him and dived for the wicker mat that lay beside the hearth. I closed my eyes for a while, fighting the fatigue and pangs of hunger that were both vying for immediate attention. Before long, we were taken to dinner in the adjacent hut, where the ULFA boys had prepared a meal. I was so hungry that I swallowed everything on the plate – rice, squash and dried fish, all cooked without oil – and found it wonderfully tasty. Herbs and green chillies had been ground into a paste for a chutney. It was spicy but delicious when mixed together with the other ingredients.

After dinner, I tucked myself into a sleeping bag on the very hard but comfortable wooden floor of an inner room in the hut. This room had a bamboo balcony supported by logs sunk into the ground. Pradip, Iqbal and Bora shared the room with me, while the other two were accommodated in

another hut. The chill was as intense as the previous night, but the neighbouring households had sent us some extra blankets to throw overselves. I closed my eyes, reviewed the highlights of the day and the distance we covered. If this was the pattern throughout, our assignment would take much longer to complete than I had anticipated. I didn't know when I fell asleep.

Early in the morning the next day, our group got busy with arranging our rations and charting the route to be taken. Bijit had already cooked our meal and kept it ready for us. Simple again, but incredibly tasty. The chicken had been boiled with two herbs, mejenga and manimuni. As we finished, Iqbal informed us that Bharali would join us, and that there was something else we may need to do to pass through an area tomorrow.

'Is it the Assam Rifles again?' I asked.

'They are far behind us. Now there are two routes from here, one short and the other not so short,' Iqbal explained. 'It's no problem if we opt for the longer one, but you will have to put on our attire if we take the short cut.'

'Why? Will we have to prove our identities?'

'Yes. We have a checkpoint nearby and we don't want anybody to know that you're journalists,' he replied, and added that we could make a final decision in the evening.

'Until then, can I move around and explore the village?'

Rathin was to be my escort and we were not to go far. We strolled through the main pathway and eventually reached the end of the village, about 200 metres away. I climbed the mound abutting the gate for a panoramic view of the settlement. Nearly a hundred-odd houses of thatch and bamboo formed a jumbled pattern, but it was the incredible altitude that amazed me. Another village loomed in the distance at the same elevation, just below the peak. They were flanked by blue hills all around, some separated from each other, others contiguous.

As we sauntered back, half-naked toddlers stared at us wide-eyed as did a few elders near the church. Rathin exchanged greetings with a few in Nagamese. The village wore a deserted look and I surmised that most of the residents were off working in the fields. We moved past the row of houses to the midpoint flanking a volleyball field with two bamboo poles and a net that had more holes than string. Pigs and fowl dawdling on the path moved away as we drew near, perhaps unused to visitors. Nearby, water dripped from an open duct made of bamboo canes split lengthwise and joined to reach a small

waterfall on the northern side. A track led to an adjoining hill with a few huts on stilts, much like the one where we had stayed, exotic, and usually with two rooms. The elders slept on bamboo beds attached to the wall in the bigger room and the others spread out on the earthen floor near the hearth on thin sheets. The rooms were dark and lit up by the fireplace in the evenings. The roof, made of toko leaves, was precisely balanced and supported by upright logs in the front and back.

I had many questions, but there would be no answers because I was expressly forbidden from speaking to the locals. I turned to Rathin. He willingly opened up about the village. It was home to the Konyak, the biggest among the Naga tribes, who lived both in India and Myanmar. They had relatives across the border and the residents frequently hopped across, either for business or for social purposes. Items like salt and lentils were brought from a few shops in Nagaland, and sometimes even rice and vegetables, during periods of food scarcity. Some huts had flat shining black panels for harnessing solar energy – these are also seen in the border villages in India. But why only in a few houses? Rathin said having an electric bulb in the house was a 'luxury' that few could afford. Interesting. So, clearly there was a class divide among them. This phenomenon has been detected in recent times among many tribal communities that were known to be historically egalitarian. What was the source of their extra income? He did not know. I would need to wait a few days more for answers.

What perplexed me even more was Rathin's remark that some people from this village and others were on the voting lists in Nagaland. Many had their names on the electoral rolls, he said, which is regularly updated whenever a revision takes place. They returned laden with gifts from politicians after each exercise. Not surprising. There was no way to immediately verify what he had said, but it sounded very plausible. There were no restrictions on border-crossing for the inhabitants of these settlements. During elections, the media regularly came up with news stories about populations living in the border regions between states enjoying the unique privilege of voting in both states.

The sightseeing complete, we were about to return when the uncanny silence of the village was shattered by a commotion. We turned around and saw some children and elders rushing towards the entrance. We too advanced cautiously and waited at a distance until the reason became apparent – a deer had been shot and was being brought to the village. The animal, the size of a

small buffalo, was being carried on a bamboo pole by four persons. Its heart had been pierced by a bullet from a muzzle-loading gun. The hunter, a brawny middle-aged man, began narrating his adventure to the small crowd that had assembled outside his home. In the evening, he would have to distribute its meat to the elders, including the chief, and perhaps also organize a feast for his relatives, Rathin explained.

Back in our hut, we were all set for the journey tomorrow. We were to take the longer, but safer, route. Nevertheless, we were asked to change into camouflage pants. The march would be in a single column with a gap of 15 metres between two people. Bharali would walk ahead and Bijit behind Pradip and me. ULFA squads and other rebels always follow this pattern of deployment whenever they are on the move in the hills, from one camp to another, or going on operations across the border. Just as we did, they halt at villages and hideouts for food and shelter, but trek at double the speed we had managed to do so far. Apart from rifles and ammunition, they carry small quantities of rice, soap, toothpaste, machetes, radios, a sheet of polythene for cover during rain, and a light rectangular saucepan for cooking. Once they enter the north-east, the rebels hole up in hideouts, and usually move only after dark to other destinations.

Ration was gathered for two weeks: rice, salt, dried fish, chillies and sugar. Our backpacks were opened and reassembled; the more important items, likely to be required frequently during the march, were kept in one and the rest put into another. As the packing was in progress, Radio Dibrugarh flashed the news that the then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, had made a case once again with the visiting Myanmarese president, Thein Sein, for elimination of rebel bases in the neighbouring country. And the president had assured him that all efforts would be made to do so. The cadres stopped for a while, burst out laughing, and then resumed their task. There were sixteen bags in all, both big and small, wrapped in sturdy bamboo baskets. One was full of ammunition, TNT explosive and grenades; another had blankets, and so on.

TNT? Why was this required when there were grenades and rifles? Will bomb-making be necessary?

'No, it's for a different purpose. Hang on, you will see for yourself,' said Bora.

'That's quite mysterious. But who will carry all these? Our group has only seven members.'

‘There is a system called sakhan here,’ he explained. ‘They are people who will carry these bags to the next village or destination. It is the responsibility of the Naga officer here to arrange for this but the weight of each bag cannot exceed 15 kilograms.’

‘How much do they charge?’ I asked.

‘No, the system does not run on money. It’s a service made mandatory for the villages by the Government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland (GPRN). They have to carry the belongings of all revolutionary groups that arrived in the village. And this explains why we are always sympathetic to them. You will see for yourself the amount of hardship these people can bear.’

Bora could not have been more right. Girls as young as twelve or thirteen carried the baskets to the next village in a group of sixteen people. One such group also included an old woman of around seventy. They left around the same time in the morning as us, just minutes after daybreak. And then, to our utter humiliation, we met them on their way back around noon at a point when we had completed just half the distance to our destination. It was difficult to gauge the distance, but I estimated that it was approximately 20 kilometres. Bowled over by their speed and stamina, I bitterly regretted not being able to take their photographs, because this was another one of the don’ts in our list. Running an errand for the NSCN(K) such as this was a part of their daily lives. After reaching home, they would probably leave for the fields for the day’s arduous chores.

As it emerged, an efficient ‘rotating system’ had been put in place by the GPRN across the region for providing assistance to rebel groups. Every household would have to provide shelter to members of rebel outfits by turn and carry their belongings to the next destination, which could be a camp, a village or a river. Cadres of all groups had been strictly instructed not to misbehave with the villagers, but there had been instances of high-handedness by some smaller groups, provoking the GPRN to issue warnings. However, ULFA had always been extra-careful while dealing with them. The sakhans were accompanied by Rathin to our next destination. It struck me later that I should find out the reason for this. They were locals, so why the need to escort them?

‘No, no. It’s not because they (the sakhans) need escort,’ Bharali clarified. ‘If something is lost or goes missing, we can’t accuse anybody. At best we can complain to the officer in the village who would then impose fines on the

entire group which we would rather avoid.'

This was the fourth day of our journey since we stepped into eastern Nagaland, and the track was even worse than the previous one. It wound its way around the side of the hill and at times was only about four inches wide. Invariably, Pradip and I would turn with our faces against the hill, our arms stretched out so the cadres could hold our hands and move ahead slowly, sidling. We followed the advice we were given: not to look down or up. I did this once and dreadfully pessimistic thoughts gripped me at once. Although we did our best to stay upbeat, things started spinning out of control very soon. Four hours later, Iqbal ordered us to halt. His expression had changed by the time he finished talking on the walkie-talkie.

'We have been asked not to proceed further,' he said curtly.

'Oh no. But, why?'

'We have been told to put you up at a safe location until we're given further instructions. The village we stayed at last night is the safest and we will have to turn back.'

'What happened? Can you please ask them if we can put up at the next village because moving into the reverse gear is discouraging.'

'Okay. Let me try … Saigon … Saigon …' Within minutes, his message was flashed to far-off destinations. The reply that came in after half an hour allowed us to proceed to the next village where we landed late in the afternoon. The hut we now occupied was bigger than the previous one, but of the same design.

Uncertainty was writ large on everybody's face. Iqbal and Bharali had a whispered conversation in the evening. The mood was sombre the next morning as well. Something was wrong. Was this the end of the assignment? After brunch, I enquired about the sudden break in the journey, and came to know from Rathin that a camp had been burnt down somewhere by the Myanmarese army and nothing more. I presumed that the ULFA top brass did not want to take any chances with our security and we would be allowed to advance only if they felt the situation had improved. Two days passed; we ate, slept and, sometimes, sat outside the house. Every morning and evening, we asked Iqbal if there were any further developments. He would shake his head and say no. I finished reading the book that I had brought along and there was nothing else to do. There was only one way to break the boredom, so I tried to reason with Iqbal.

'You know our job is to write after we return, and we can't give wrong or

inadequate information in our stories. So, let me interact with the people here and gather information.' I suggested.

Iqbal thought for a while, and I assured him that I would not disclose my identity to them or theirs in my writings. 'And I will, myself, tell Sir (chief of staff Baruah) that I had spoken to people in the villages. Please rest assured.'

He agreed on the condition that I was not to step out of the house alone. I asked him about our destination and duration of the journey and convinced him that there would be no harm in us knowing these details. Iqbal mentioned the name of the location he had been tasked to take us to, a place I had heard about long ago, but he added that we might be taken to a safer area. But how many days would our journey last from here? Approximately three weeks, he replied, if we marched without interruption.

So I walked up and down in the village every afternoon with either Bijit or Rathin, to observe and gather as much information as I possibly could about the habitat, its way of life and customs. This was also a Konyak village, about the same size as the previous one, except it was laid out like an elongated semicircle on the hill. People assumed I was a senior ULFA functionary and therefore always provided escort, and they opened their hearts to me. Although very few had heard about ULFA, they assumed we were rebels fighting for the 'independence' of our land, which was located not very far from theirs. And that we had joined forces with NSCN(K) for a combined campaign to take on the oppressive governments. I was amazed at how trusting these people still were. They did not hesitate with their answers to any of my questions.

It became my habit to greet everybody whom I met on the way. 'Brother, I hope you are fine. You must have come from the fields,' I would say.

And pat came their reply with an unfailing smile, 'Yes, we are fine. Hope you are enjoying your stay.'

It was difficult to believe that these people were once hostile to their neighbours and outsiders.

They trekked for hours every day to their fields on some distant hill. Early morning, they would leave in groups, and return laden with firewood, vegetables and herbs after sundown every day. No wonder, the average Naga is sturdier and healthier than the norm in the plains, even if they eat only two meals a day. The beauty of their simple diet is that everything is either boiled or dried and prepared without oil and sugar, which are the causes of so many diseases. Rice as a staple diet is replaced by pounded maize during the

winter months and consumed in combination with squash, pumpkin, and a few other vegetables. The non-vegetarian menu is pork, dried fish, chicken and dog; the list is quite a lot longer than that, as we were to realize later.

There were interesting facts about every facet of the village and not everything tallied with the fragmentary accounts about this region that I had heard or read. It was quite likely that vital developments had occurred with the passage of time. For one, there were neither any topless women nor any men wearing nothing but headgear and
loincloth in the two villages we had been in so far. Some women applied a creamy-white paste on their faces for protection against the sun, which, according to the ULFA boys, was sandalwood, found deep in the hills. Occasionally, a man would be seen wearing a Levi's jeans or a chic jacket, its colour faded and replaced by a layer of brown dirt. Clothes were a rare commodity, and regular laundering was believed to reduce their shelf life.

I also learnt that this village had been converted to Christianity decades ago by missionaries who had come from Nagaland, and it was among the first in the zone to have adopted the new faith. A board on the door of the conspicuous Baptist church on the northern flank mentioned 1978 as the year of its establishment. The middle-aged pastor was a highly respected man in the village and was gifted vegetables and other eatables throughout the year. Near the church was a derelict lamp post that was a grim souvenir of the efforts that would have been made in the distant past to generate hydel power from the stream below. Water was abundant and some huts enjoyed the privilege of cultivating vegetables in their courtyards.

Anyway, it was too early to draw any conclusions as we had not even covered 10 per cent of the assignment. Later, a pattern would emerge, comparisons would be made and the dots connected. We would have a more holistic picture of life as it was lived here. But the exciting moments came with the anxious periods as well during these days in the village. A topic that had enthralled me ever since I began reading about the Nagas was 'headhunting'. The custom entailed preserving a person's head after decapitating him, which was often the cause of inter-village wars. It had not been practised in Nagaland for decades now, perhaps since long before independence. But the ULFA functionaries told me that the last head was taken in the early 1980s in eastern Nagaland. And this was still fresh in public memory – and not the least for village chief, K. Wangnao. He walked proudly with five brass icons of human heads hanging from his neck:

symbolic of the five people he had beheaded many years ago. They were reminders of a valiant past when the village successfully conducted raids against its neighbours. Wangnao had earned the reputation of being the 'best headhunter' for many years in the village and rightfully succeeded his father as the Ang (village chief).

I tracked down Wangnao to the morung, the Naga youth dormitory, one afternoon with the aim of interviewing him. This was a rare occasion and Iqbal even permitted me to take his photograph as a special exemption. He was in an inebriated state with his colleagues after smoking opium and was simply in no mood to talk. He continued taking long drags of the smoke from a bamboo pipe and conversed in the local language with his mates. The NSCN officer who had brought me advised me to sit with them and chat.

'Brother, I hope everything is fine in your basti,' I began after a while hoping to catch the chief's attention.

'Yes. Everything is fine,' he replied tersely. I was hoping for more.

'I would like to sit down with you for some time, if that's alright.'

'Yes. That's okay.' He looked at me only once and continued talking to his friends until they left. I tentatively tried again.

'Brother, the icons look lovely on you and you are a greatly respected man in the village. Would you mind if I asked you how you managed to get those heads?'

He glared at me silently for a few moments. Then he apparently had a change of heart and agreed to come out to have his picture taken, and gradually opened up to me about the past.

'I took my first head fifty years ago, when I led the raiding parties. The other village had just taken a head from ours and so we made plans to retaliate. But our adversaries were too well prepared and we had to wait for almost a year before the score could be settled,' Wangnao said as he took swigs of tea from a dirty cup. The second and the third heads came in quick succession, but he had to wait and make several attempts over many years before he managed to get the last two. As was the norm in those days, he had brought the severed heads home and hung them on a pole outside his hut.

How did the custom originate? The chief had no answer but recounted the earlier belief that neighbours' heads enhanced the prosperity of a village. The belief was that the 'soul matter' on which life depended was stored in the heads of humans. Every time a new head came, there were greater chances of prosperity and a good harvest. Warriors capable of claiming

heads were entitled to special attires and ornaments. A person without a head to his credit had difficulty in getting a bride and became an object of ridicule among the women. Not even women and children were spared in headhunting. In fact, a woman's head was considered a prized trophy as they were always given more protection by the village and taking her head meant breaching the security of the adversaries. Another reason perhaps was the urge to reduce the enemy's population by killing women. Hair from the woman's head could also be used for ornamental purposes.

And how did the practice end? The chief was of the view that it was not until the GPRN was established in 1980 that headhunting was banned altogether, although there had been ongoing efforts to bring this practice to an end since the 1960s. The GPRN had to impose a total embargo, and mete out exemplary punishment to defaulters. He did not lament that no more icons could be added to the plaque that dangled from his neck. An elder who had just joined him was unequivocal in asserting that the need of the hour was unity amongst the Nagas and not heads, as this practice would set them against each other again and fuel hostilities between the villages. It was much more important, he said, to face the common enemy and defeat them.

But Wangnao sprang a surprise as the interview drew to a close. 'You have taken my photograph. Give me some money for opium,' he demanded.

I froze, terrified. 'I don't have much money with me.'

But he became insistent. I looked at the door; running away was not a safe option. A machete was lying within his reach. As I sought to convince him, the NSCN(K) officer, who had escorted me and was waiting outside, stepped into the hut and whisked me away. Wangnao was clearly upset and kept glowering at me. I later sent a hundred-rupee note to him in the evening.

My pleasant stay at the village and conversations with the villagers had kept me engrossed all these days, but it was soon time to move on. A message on the radio had instructed us to proceed after a six-day stopover in this village. Then we learnt that a platoon of the Myanmarese army had arrived at the bank of a river we would be crossing soon. If they had decided to pitch camp there for any length of time it would probably have meant an end to our assignment because the alternative route was too hostile for newcomers and accidents were almost certain. Fortunately for us, they had decided to withdraw to the battalion headquarters.

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So we hit the trail again on the eleventh day. As was the norm, we set out

early in the morning a few minutes after daybreak and a meal. The weather was moderately frosty and humid from last night's shower. There were two tight spots again that filled us with trepidation. The first was a downhill stretch of around a 100 metres that led into a stream – an alarming descent on an uneven, pebbled surface made slippery by the overnight drizzle. Bharali, who was ahead of us, went down effortlessly, placing one foot on a rock in the middle of the path, and the other, on the side at a carefully chosen spot. After about 20 metres of the descent, he waited for us to follow. I did not attempt to emulate his style; instead, I sat and slithered down ignominiously. To help me, Iqbal positioned himself in the middle of the stretch beside the narrow trail, and we descended together. It was painful but we managed to scrape through without a hitch.

Then there was the lull of a gradual descent and the sight of a stream below strewn with big rocks. But our path was not going down; it led us to a steep ascent towards a treacherous-looking hanging bridge that was the most menacing I had ever seen in my life. Two long bamboos spanned the stream with their ends in a tangle of creepers and undergrowth. Although the water below was not too deep, the rocks would be deadly if one were to slip and fall. We watched closely as Bora first crossed over, followed by Rathin. The technique looked simple enough: they walked sideways holding on to a thick vine overhead while maintaining a uniform speed to prevent the bridge from swaying. When I stepped on, I made sure I had a firm grip on the vine – I would have a chance to survive even if the bridge collapsed beneath me. But the structure was much stronger than I had supposed. It lurched a bit as I began taking long steps, making my heart skip a few beats. The duo on the other bank looked encouragingly at me and cheered loudly as I reached them. The others crossed over within a few minutes.

It was noon when we sat down for a quick meal of cold rice that we had brought wrapped in banana leaves and I made it tastier by pouring glucose over it. It was amazing how the meal instantly energized me, imbuing everything with a sense of purpose. The march continued at a slow pace until the next destination, a jungle hideout near a waterfall, which we reached after sunset. Bijit had arrived earlier with the sakhans and they had erected two neat tents with bamboo poles covered with blue polythene sheets, and also prepared a meal of rice and vegetables for the team. This was served to us in front of a cheerfully blazing bonfire as soon as we arrived.

The next day, I had a knee pain so excruciating that it made my eyes water.

Months of exercise and walking in the plains ahead of the assignment seemed to have been of no use. I limped the entire way, drastically impacting our marching speed. Although once every hour Bora sprayed a pain-killing lotion on my knee, the pain returned with a vengeance as soon as the trek was resumed. After dinner, hot water was poured over the painful portion of my leg on Iqbal's advice. He said this treatment was found to be effective with others who had the same complaint. It didn't help me much anyway. The pain ceased only at the end of the day when I took a break from walking, and started all over again an hour or so after the march began in the morning.

Eventually, Bora decided to use the injections he had brought with him from across the border. I was wary because none of the usual pre-injection routines would be followed, but I could not bring myself to refuse. If the injections could eliminate the pain, I was willing to take the risk. Seven Diclofenac ampoules were emptied in as many days into my derrière, and I must admit that never before had I received such painless injections. Bora kept assuring me that I would be relieved of the pain, but the first few doses failed to have any effect. Two days later, and I had to be practically dragged across short distances with my arms around the shoulders of two cadres. The pain seemed to gradually improve over the next five days, and then disappeared altogether after a week or so. Perhaps our bodies were acclimatizing to the terrain and weather. I heaved a huge sigh of relief.

When we arrived at a point that received signals from a cellphone tower, Pradip and I managed to send text messages to our relatives and friends whom we had been missing very much. We informed them that we were fine, having a good time and making good progress on our journey. I also briefly narrated a couple of uproarious episodes to my wife which had actually scared me quite a bit at the time – like some of those terrifying precipices and the stoned headhunter who had insisted on payment for having modelled for me.

One evening, Bijit and I visited the home of a village elder who had been associated with the undivided National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). I wanted to listen to his experiences. He was alone in the big dark house, seated by the fireplace and preparing his dinner. I greeted him and sat down by his side on a small wooden stool. He was perhaps not in the mood to talk. But he silently poured tea for me, and then moved his hand on the bamboo-tray-like fixture above the hearth, held in place by vines suspended from the roof. The next few minutes were some of the most frightening

moments in my life.

He pulled out a foot-long dried rat killed months ago and placed it in a bowl. He then sprinkled chopped pieces of some herb over it and began grinding the carcass with a blunt piece of wood. He then broke his silence and casually chatted and enquired about our journey even as he continued to pound. As far as I could make out in the dim light, his efforts resulted in a sort of green-and-black chutney. After a few minutes, he stopped and emptied the delicacy on to a small plate. Will he offer it to me? Yes, he did, with a grin. I took the plate, gazed with fascination at the puréed rodent, all the time wondering what to do next. Before setting out on this journey, I had vowed to eat anything and everything, including snakes and dogs, if the situation so demanded, but never in my wildest nightmares did I expect to be served a rat. I wondered for a moment if I could just hold my breath and swallow it, but the portion was not small. The only option was to politely refuse with a seemingly valid excuse. I opted for this exit, and told him that I had had my dinner and would prefer to taste this some other time. I appreciated the flavour of the tea which he had served to me, expressed my gratitude and beat a strategic retreat.

However, the rats continued to haunt me, and I got another taste within days, albeit in a different manner. A few days later, in another village, after we had retired for the night, I woke up around midnight with a strange sensation on my head. Somebody was pulling my hair. And something else was crawling over the blanket that covered me. My immediate reaction was not to move because it could be somebody either trying to rob me or attempting something worse. I stealthily grabbed hold of the khukri that lay beside the sleeping bag. But even as I did, I realized they were rats that had swarmed into the house in search of food. Next morning, I found gaping holes in the sleeping bag and the blanket.

As we moved deeper into the jungle and hills in the days ahead, we found rats coming out in hordes during the night in the villages and hideouts. Their operation started close to midnight and lasted for only a couple of hours. They chewed everything that came their way, sparing only the tray suspended above the fireplace. Their presence was accepted, a host once told me, because they could not be prevented from coming inside the house. But why were they not eaten? Rats for chutney were a different breed, one that contained more fat. They were captured by digging up clumps of bamboo in the jungle and sometimes by laying traps. There was one giant specimen that I

saw being captured by two youths; it was big enough to be a mongoose.

With the knee pain gone, my trekking pace improved marginally. Three weeks later, we were still on a roller-coaster track that took us up and down through dense subtropical vegetation, interspersed with patches laid bare by jhum cultivation. Occasionally, a village would be connected to another in a zigzagging trail at the hilltops through ridges and our march would be effortless and relaxed. This usually happened when excess population in a village was settled at a nearby crest necessitating close contact. A stream would invariably flow between two hills where we sat down, rested and ate rice to replenish our energy levels. I spoke to people whenever the opportunity arose, during the brief stopovers, and tried to understand their perspective of events including the current scenario.

Thus, step by step, we trudged on and covered a long distance. There were many things that we saw and experienced for the first time, and I learnt a lot about one of the least known regions on earth that modern civilization was yet to colonize. Through all the hardship, there was pleasure – the mystery of the hills, the beauty around us, the vitality of the place – and they recharged us continuously for the relentless daily grind that sometimes lessened our zest to continue further.

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The winds of change are blowing in eastern Nagland, albeit at a slow pace, and blending with the elements of continuity in the culture. This was apparent, in a lesser or greater degree, in the region through which we trekked. The most vital agent in the ushering in of these changes was the breakdown of the historical isolation of villages that had existed for centuries – ever since the Nagas migrated from central China hundreds of years ago. In Nagaland (western zone), the seclusion was somewhat broken with the advent of the British and entry of missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. The east maintained status quo until the Second World War when the Allied Forces fought the Japanese in the Naga Hills. Some among them close to the border came to know about India and Myanmar only when their domain was divided and shared between the two countries.[1]

So villages continued to be ‘little republics’ ruled by an Ang, a tradition that persists to this day.[2] He is assisted by a council of elders representing all the clans. The positions are hereditary, with authority passing from the father to the eldest son in most cases in these patrilineal societies. Absolute

isolation had been broken long ago, but they were still a world unto themselves. The age-old rivalry with the neighbours continued and heads taken whenever the opportunity arose. It was not until the emergence of NSCN in 1980 that the scenario actually began to change in the east. The outfit made efforts to unify the heterogeneous tribes; a ban was clamped on headhunting and a meticulous strategy firmed up to trickle down to the grass roots to make it a people's organization. Despite that endeavour, many tribes continued to remain hostile and it took years for the organization to cultivate their support.

Simultaneously, NSCN allowed the Baptist church to step into the villages since Christianity could help spread the message of unity and forge a common identity among the Nagas.[3] It had already established a presence in some pockets decades ago and was eager to spread to newer areas. NSCN approved of the conversion, but strictly instructed the pastors against coercion since there had been opposition years ago when they sought to curb some traditional practices. The missionaries went about the task of proselytization and gradually established churches in a majority of the villages. Now people scurry to church every morning on Sundays and listen to sermons while young boys and girls vie with one another to take part in the gospel choir.

We met Pastor Peter from Nagaland, who had been a priest for the past five years at a village in the Konyak region. He wished he had been able to teach children as his colleagues did in some neighbouring villages, initiating the 'mission' in small sheds with blackboards. However, he was hopeful that he would eventually be able to establish some rudiments of an education system in his area, and did not baulk at the uphill task before him. Education, he explained, was a new concept among the people and its importance was being gradually understood. Some families had started sending children to schools that had come up in military townships like Hkamti or even further, Dimapur. After completing school, some had even been employed in menial jobs in the border towns in India while others had been enrolled in the church and GPRN. However, Peter was faced with a resource crunch, and it was not easy to arrange for donations from international agencies in these inaccessible zones. In India's north-east and other tribal areas, various agencies and counties regularly make funds available to churches. They have been successful in providing education and health care services. But in eastern Nagaland, people were not yet dependent on the church in the manner

seen elsewhere. Not unnaturally, the missionaries have not been able to ensure acceptance of all the tenets of their religion. So, past customs and practices continued to thrive, including what had been termed 'superstitious practices'.

Two weeks into the journey, I witnessed how a sick man, who had been bedridden for four months, was sought to be cured. Inside the hut, the man lay near the fireplace surrounded by his relatives. A teenager who appeared to be his son was gently massaging his chest. It was difficult to gauge his ailment. He seemed to be in pain; he groaned, coughed and sometimes held out both his hands as if to ward off the agony. I sat down on a stool at a safe distance and, after a while, I noticed a sudden flurry of activity in the courtyard of the hut. A sacrifice was about to take place for curing the sickness. I jumped up from the stool and headed straight to the scene of action where a black fowl was handed over to a person who held a machete in his hand. Its head was chopped off and the blood collected in a small bamboo container. Contrary to what I had heard before, there was no ritual or chanting of any sort. Instead, the blood was brought to the sick man who leisurely gulped it down. I was thunderstruck.

Did this actually cure people? Do such things happen very often? I shot a volley of questions to Iqbal who was sitting beside me. I asked him if he could take me to somebody who had been cured by these practices.

'This is nothing but an irrational belief. There will be more sacrifices if he survives for a few more days but does not get cured,' he replied.

More sacrifices? What else? Iqbal was of the opinion that much depended on what was available in the village. He promised to try to find out similar cases elsewhere. He narrated some interesting episodes that he had observed in the past few years. About five years ago, a person breathed his last after a four-month-long sickness. The village had indulged in a range of sacrifices, including that of a dog, and had made the patient drink the blood. Herbs from the jungle were also administered, but the man's condition only grew worse. The medicines provided by the NSCN(K) cadres did not produce the desired effect either. Iqbal also spoke of incidents when the sick were also taken to the medical centres in Nagaland. Some were cured, but some died on the way as they were being carried on bamboo stretchers over long distances.

And here's the irony. In close proximity were villages where people lived very long. There was a cemetery in one with epitaphs on the tombstones that were made from big and small stones, carved into rectangular shapes and

placed alongside tiny structures resembling huts where items used by the deceased were kept. Poring over the inscriptions, I was astounded that a majority had crossed ninety years, some even a hundred, and one had died at the age of 115. But then how did they calculate their ages if they were illiterate? Somebody said there could be errors in the dates but there was hardly any doubt that many people lived until a ripe old age without any diseases. Iqbal had even heard of a man at a village near the border who had lived up to 130 years.

Bora came to the hut looking for us. He glanced at the sick man, but was unsure what disease the man suffered from. 'It could be tuberculosis but I am not sure. I wish I could give him some medicine but I don't have anything for these ailments,' he told the relative of the ailing person, who then asked for money for treatment in Nagaland. That would have required a few thousand and the ULFA cadres did not have any surplus. Iqbal agreed with Bora and suggested that contributions ought to be taken from all the households in the village. An elder, who was listening to the conversation, commented that it was easier for people to donate in kind, but cash would be difficult since money was a 'rare and sought-after' commodity.

Quite true. Only the other day I had given Rs 50 to a group of young boys craving biscuits. Money is becoming an important commodity in eastern Nagaland and signalling the beginning of the economy's monetization. This is bound to produce irrevocable changes in both the social and political realms in the years to come. Elsewhere, in earlier times, barter was the mode of exchange until money was introduced. But in the Naga Hills, every village was independent, self-reliant and the scope of interaction with neighbours had been minimal due to headhunting and dissimilarity in the tribal dialects. Whatever interaction existed was limited to a few villages linked to one another in a web of social relations.

Money, as a means of transaction, was perhaps adopted years ago when there was surplus produce to sell. The new mode assumed greater importance when the Indian government began to focus on border trade, and rebel cadres from many organizations began taking shelter in the villages. Their essential needs like food were fulfilled in return for cash. In fact, a Naga selling something nowadays, say a pig, comes up with astronomical prices. A hard bargain followed when we were once offered a medium-sized one for Rs 14,000! After much haggling, it was finally bought for Rs 9,000, killed, and a feast followed. The importance of cash was also on account of

the tax and fines imposed by the NSCN(K). This could be on individuals, clans or the villages for commission of offences. For instance, fishing in a stream that belonged to another village could invite a fine of Rs 2,000 and three buffaloes. The penalty was high and was meant to serve as a deterrent since such activities could easily spark inter-village wars.

When I took out my wallet, one of our escorts would pull it down immediately. Showing money was an invitation to trouble. There was a tale that somebody murdered a close friend who had Rs 5,000 in cash. The murderer was apprehended and given the option of paying a heavy fine or facing capital punishment. However, as he had already spent the amount in Nagaland, he was compelled to take a bullet. On another occasion, a teenager, who did not wish to enrol in NSCN(K), bribed the concerned officer to allow him to engage in other activities in Nagaland. Money is precious and relatives often came together to live under the same roof to lessen the burden of taxes imposed by the rebels. We came across a hut housing thirty-four people. It was twice the size of a normal house, with additional rooms. New avenues were being explored and tapped for cash to meet the additional expenses. Shops selling overpriced items, like rice, mustard oil, batteries and tinned fish were seen in quite a few villages close to the border. The GPRN officials also pointed out that people were more inclined now to produce surplus from agriculture and weave more baskets since they could be sold either across the border or in townships like Lahe and Hkamti.

A complex pattern seems to be taking root, less by design and more by chance, whose consequences will become apparent several decades later. But eastern Nagaland is what it is: a world unto itself, still inaccessible and without roads. It takes days to reach the nearest town on foot, except for the people living close to the border. The locals seemed self-sufficient and had learnt to survive on their own. They have helped themselves during times of calamities, with the GPRN increasingly rendering assistance whenever the occasion demanded. Hence, the defining features of society and economy were, and are, as they were hundreds of years ago. This is as true of the slash-and-burn cultivation, still the mainstay of the economy, as it is of the forceful role of the community in every sphere. The entire village pitches in to help, whether it is to clear the jungle for farming, or help a person in distress, or on occasions like marriages.

A village chief named Khamka described the invaluable role of the morung

in inculcating the value of comradeship from a tender age. A boy becomes its member at approximately six years of age, and remains there until he marries and sets up his own independent house. It is a sort of a clubhouse where important decisions are taken, plans are chalked out and is a museum of sorts where relics and trophies of war are displayed. Sometimes there are several morungs with clear-cut and well-defined roles. Some are places where the elders hold meetings, others focus on the organization of feasts and celebrations, and yet others are a kind of rural judiciary that deal with cases and hearings for crimes and misdemeanours.

I entered a morung, hoping to discover something interesting. There were animal skulls hung on the wall all around and seven toddlers playing with sticks and engaging in a mock fight. Headhunting was long gone, but its legacy remained. Two kids even had small brass icons representing human heads wrapped around their necks, like the chief I had interviewed. Parents who were off for cultivation had left their children in the morung to be looked after by somebody specifically entrusted with babysitting. The work in the fields is harsh and tiring, and can be hazardous for children. In the peak season, the men often stay behind in shelters in the fields and only the women return home for the other household chores. As in all simple societies, there is a neat division of labour between the male and female.

Women enjoy a high social status among the Nagas, with a pivotal role in family affairs. Dowry is non-existent and cases of rape and other atrocities against women extremely rare. Whenever these incidents happen, the accused may be asked to marry the girl or pay a heavy fine for the offence. Sex before marriage is neither taboo nor a sin. Among some tribes it is expected of the boy and girl to spend time together and decide whether or not to get married. Women enjoy a great deal of freedom even though they are not included in the decision-making processes of the clan or the village. On the flip side is their daily itinerary, which is unenviable; it seemed more arduous than that of their male counterparts, who were occupied with affairs of the village and the government, besides cultivation. Customs expect a Naga woman to be obedient and humble, to perform the roles of wife, mother, child-bearer, food producer and household manager.

I never saw a woman in any village sitting idle or playing games like their male counterparts. One day, while I was in a small village, I was awakened at 3 a.m. by continuous rhythmic thuds, like a hammer beating the walls of the hut. I got up and saw the lady of the household and her two daughters

pounding maize in the holes of a tree trunk. At dawn, they fetched water from the waterfall and then cooked food before leaving for the fields. In the evening, they came home to take care of the children and cook.

The lady of that house complained that her husband was a 'kani addict' who smoked every evening in the company of other people in the village. 'Not that he does not work, but he has become very indifferent. A huge part of the cultivation tract is kept aside for opium every year. This is bad for our maize and vegetable production,' she said in Nagamese. What she said could be true of many families in this region. As we marched, we found farmers sowing opium seeds in tracts cleared for crop growing high up in the hills. A part of the produce was perhaps also to be sold in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Opium is supposed to make an addict lazy, but we observed the exact opposite phenomenon in
this region.

Our departure to the next station was delayed one morning because the sakhan refused to carry our bags. He said he was 'low' and it would be difficult for him to scale the high hills. I was at a loss to understand his words until Bijit clarified the meaning. He said he needed his morning dose of opium before he could carry the bags. His reluctance vanished and he heaved a sigh of relief after his friend handed him a small brown pouch containing opium. He soon caught up with us on the way, overtook us, left our luggage at our next station, and met us on his way back when we were still halfway to our destination. This was a new sort of opium addict.

Opium smoking was banned in only one of the villages we passed through. Nobody was allowed to cultivate it, and individuals caught with the item were penalized heavily. But addiction was rampant in a majority of these villages, much like in Arunachal Pradesh's eastern districts of Tirap and Changlang, or Mon and Tuensang in Nagaland. It is believed that opium causes no harm, rather it prevents diseases and reduces body aches. In some cases, addicts were found smoking at intervals of four to five hours; others smoked once in the evening after completing the day's work.

Keen to experience what I had heard about for ages, and witnessed for several weeks now, I decided to give it a whirl in a village where a kani session was on in the house where we landed one evening. I could afford to lie in bed if I had a heavy head the next day because we had decided to take a break from our trek. However, I had to do it without the knowledge of the ULFA cadres. Under the pretext of warming myself, I sat down at the

fireplace and told the men that I would also like to take a few puffs. They were slightly startled because ULFA and the other rebel groups were known to stay away from all kinds of addictions. I put a hundred-rupee note in the pocket of the person who was the host and the leader of the group. His eyes gleamed and he reached into his bag for more opium to prepare for a fresh session.

The process was tedious but interesting to watch. A dark, sticky resin was collected in ribbons of cloth from a slash on the bulb of the opium plant. The steeped cloth was then dried and cut into smaller strips. The host immersed one such strip in a large spoonful of hot water until all the sap was extracted from the rag. This solution was now smeared on a dry toko leaf which was cut into long narrow strips. Shreds of the leaf were then inserted into a hole of a long bamboo pipe, burnt and the smoke inhaled. My turn came and I grabbed the green bamboo pipe. I had to be quick about it and finish off before the cadres, who were out foraging for dinner, returned.

I inhaled and exhaled the mildly bitter smoke for three to four minutes. Each time I exhaled, I paused to sip a small quantity of green tea from a broken cup, as was the norm in such sessions. I stayed for about twenty minutes and then left after thanking the host. I expected to go into a sort of psychedelic delirium, and headed straight for the sleeping bag on the floor. But nothing much happened except a bout of acidity and mild stomach-ache the next morning. I wondered why the Nagas were so addicted to it when it had no effect. Perhaps one got a kick out of it only if taken in sufficient quantity. I was not sure, but I was happy to leave it at that.

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It was 1 November 2011, the twenty-second day of our journey. We were yet to set foot in the valley and I didn't know when we would reach our destination. Each of our companions had a different estimate of the travel time. 'It all depends upon you. The faster you move, the quicker we will reach,' was their standard reply each time we asked. So we stopped bothering them and kept on marching.

Pradip and I would talk to each other about the completion of the assignment quite often after dinner. I did not quite share his optimistic view that we would reach home by the end of December. We didn't know the situation at the camp to which we were heading, and whether the chief of staff and other leaders would actually be present when we reached it. They were known not to stay at one place for long due to security issues. We could

also be frequently shifted and taken to other locations. Four months was my estimate of the time needed to complete the assignment.

On 27 October, we had crossed the Konyak and landed in the Lainong Naga region. Here the villages were smaller, with fewer people, and the economy was subsistence-oriented, or so it seemed. The church was missing in some villages, and where it existed, it was a hut of bamboo and thatch instead of concrete structures. For the first time, I saw a few Naga elders wearing the loincloths about which I had heard so much. Others were skimpily dressed and there were more semi-naked children roaming around than in the areas we had just been through. Perhaps there was less money to buy clothes as there was less surplus to sell. Only squash was available among the vegetable items along with akhuni, made from fermented bean. We would, therefore, stop at certain places during the trek and pick up herbs from the path that could be boiled and eaten with rice. The most common was the foul-smelling masundari, which is also found in abundance in the north-east and supposed to cure stomach ailments.

But this first day of November, the morning meal was special, with pork purchased the previous evening from a person who had slaughtered a pig for some occasion. It was boiled for around thirty minutes, mixed with ginger, chillies and salt and then with akhuni, and then served with rice. A foul smell emanated from it, like that from dried fish, but it was extraordinarily delicious. We ate some more and then set off before sunrise to arrive at the first Pangmi (or Pangmei) Naga village after a short trek of six hours.[4] The houses here were built on a plinth of wood and bamboo, and were cleaner and bigger in size. The habitat bustled with greater activity as there were more inhabitants. But we were in a quandary; there were no houses provided for us to stay the night. Rebels from three Manipuri groups who had arrived earlier had already been accommodated. The next destination was quite a distance away and it was unsafe to walk through the stretch after dark due to the presence of bears.

After a couple of hours, an NSCN(K) cadre took us to the pastor's house which was under construction. It was empty, as the owner had gone to Nagaland to attend a meeting. We placed our bags inside and, looking through the windows, I noticed water gushing out from a bamboo duct behind the morung. Even though it was a cold day, I could not resist the temptation of pouring water over my body. Like the others, I hadn't bathed for more than three weeks. The daily itinerary was such that there had been little scope for

bathing regularly. We usually arrived late in the villages or hideouts and could not stop for long at the streams.

I made a dash to the spot, washed my underclothes, and rinsed myself with soap. Layers of dirt peeled away from my skin. I was a bit dejected to see blood oozing out from the numerous sores that covered my body from insect bites. The allergy tablets did not work, nor the skin ointment that I had brought. Among the bloodsucking flies, the most terrifying was the damdim (or dim-dim), which is also found in the hill states of the north-east. It is tiny, golden-coloured and resembles a housefly. It creeps into one's shirt, nose and ears, and leaves gaping holes in the skin after it is done sucking your blood. Unlike a mosquito, you'd feel its bite a few minutes after it has gleefully flown away to safety. The itching from these bites normally began during the night and stopped only while we were walking. We devoted at least half an hour every night and morning to scratching the skin. Pradip suffered as well, and both of us were extremely worried that there was no sign of abatement. Our vests became bloodstained from the sores. Giving stiff competition to damdim was the kuttapuk (dog insect) that came out only at night. It sneaked into the sleeping bag, trousers and vests producing an irritating sensation on the skin as it nibbled and then vanished.

But why were the locals not stung? Even the ULFA guys accompanying us never complained of them. They said the damdim liked feeding on 'new blood'. Almost all new recruits of ULFA who were taken to camps on this route faced this onslaught. But, we were assured, there would be less in the valley, and almost nil further east where we were to be taken. All we would have to do is bathe with Dettol for four days. In any case, the cold bath left me feeling fresh, re-energized and greatly reduced the itching. I returned to the hut and lay down on the sleeping bag. Pradip came in after half an hour and whispered something excitedly into my ears.

'There's good news. I have found McDowell brandy and a Myanmarese whisky called Hero. But they are expensive. What do you think?' he asked.

'We don't have to think at all. Get the Indian stuff,' I replied, and gave him two 500-rupee notes.

Pradip purchased three half bottles for Rs 900, and I opened one to check if it was spurious. It was not. Perhaps the technique was still unknown to the folk here. The seller revealed to Pradip that the brandy came from Arunachal Pradesh, and the whisky from the valley below. Supply was in small quantities since there was not very much demand for it. Alcohol was

consumed only on special occasions like marriages. Iqbal suggested that we drink in the room quietly without getting drunk since rebel cadres were known in the villages to abstain from alcohol and smoking.

We were overjoyed, having had no alcohol at all since setting foot in this region. We did not make so bold as to search for liquor or express our desire for fear of offending the other members of the squad. The three bottles were finished in as many days, because we could not resist the temptation of getting tipsy in the evening after the day's labour. We were hoping to purchase more, but they were unavailable as we moved into the more remote areas. We had to settle for the local brew, and a young boy would usually be told to locate a hut where it was made. We would land there after dinner, pay a nominal amount to the host and hurriedly drink the white syrupy liquid. Maize was mixed with herbs, fermented in a bamboo jar and drunk with hot water. It gave a very mild kick that lasted for about three hours for us.

The weather was getting colder and every day it was a struggle getting out of bed. The hills were shrouded with layers of fog in the morning with visibility reduced to only a few metres sometimes. However, the paths became easier to negotiate, the hills not as high. Every day we hoped to cover as much distance as possible before noon. While crossing certain high points in the hills, our fingers went numb and our noses began to run. The temperature was almost below freezing and we followed the Naga adage of keeping silent when passing over such spots or tricky trails. It is believed that fog and clouds gather around you if you speak or laugh loudly as this disturbs the spirits in the air, and might lead to unexpected problems. Perhaps I spoke too much one day, and a day later a mishap was just about averted. Only this time, it was on water.

On 11 November 2011, we arrived at the bank of a big stream that was too deep to be forded on foot as we had been doing thus far. We were to cross to the other side on a bamboo raft that had no oars. It was connected to both the banks with strong creepers. I was baffled for a while until I understood that it would have to be hauled from the opposite bank. Two middle-aged locals from the next village, who had been informed about our schedule the previous evening by radio, had positioned themselves on the other side. The first group of four persons landed safely and the raft was reeled back by Rathin for the second group, which included me, to cross. The duo got on with towing again from the bank until we reached the midpoint of the stream when Bijit yelled that the rope had snapped. One of the locals surged

forward into the water to catch the broken vine, but in vain. For a few seconds, the raft drifted uncontrollably downstream and headed for a sort of whirlpool about 20 metres ahead. We would tumble anyway, I thought, and was preparing to dive into the water. I knew how to swim. But I was very worried about the camera and recorder, which were not in waterproof cases. While I was dithering about my course of action, Iqbal gave his pistol to Rathin, plunged into the stream and grabbed hold of the vine. The raft was still drifting inexorably towards the current and, for a moment, it seemed like Iqbal would not be able to stop it. But he did manage to turn it aside and reduce its speed. He then swam towards the bank and wrapped the vine around a boulder. We landed safely and sat on the bank.

Iqbal was drenched and he changed into a gamusa while his clothes dried. I admired his courage and his commitment to the command given to him: to deliver us safely. He and Bharali represented a cadre of ULFA that had remained hidden from public glare. Their entire lives had been spent in the jungle, moving most of the time and managing the group's logistics and operations. Their sacrifices contributed in no small measure in keeping ULFA alive in times of distress. But, for now, we deserved a celebration for Iqbal's efforts. A fire was lit with twigs and tea leaves quickly boiled in a small aluminium saucepan. There were only three cups and we drank taking turns. I threw a few queries to Iqbal.

'This is not the first time you have dived like this,' I said.

With his usual grin and soft tone, he replied that, being a guerrilla, it was necessary to dive all the time. 'We have gone through many dangerous situations in the past. Much like the others who have spent years in rebel organizations,' he replied.

'Can you recall similar instances?'

He thought for a while and replied, 'Yes, there have been quite a few and once when I was still undergoing training.' He did not elaborate further and I did not press him.

We resumed the walk, climbed the mound adjoining the bank and stepped into a world of banana trees. They stretched endlessly, to my left and right, touching each other like a plantation. I stopped to absorb the sight; the terrain sloped down a bit from the place we were standing and up again to the foothill. The banana forest covered an area of more than 2 kilometres. The path cut through the middle of the stretch and we trampled on piles of dry leaves. Although there were no bananas, the smell of the fruit filled the entire

place. Iqbal, who was behind me, said the area was filled with poisonous snakes during the rainy season. Now, that's something I had to capture on camera, so I decided I would take photographs on the return journey. We reached the next village shortly after sunset.

In the evening, Bharali informed us that there were only two villages and a hideout to be covered over the next three days before we arrived at the valley. But there was danger ahead – tomorrow we would have to march through a newly constructed mud-and-gravel road often patrolled by the Myanmarese army. A company was stationed just beyond two hills. We would have to walk very fast, even run if the situation warranted. But how long was this stretch? Bora, who had travelled on this route earlier, revealed that it was a plain stretch close to 15 kilometres.

Bharali returned after speaking to the village chief and explained that the necessary arrangements had been made. We would have to begin marching at 4 a.m. while it was still dark, and cross the road before the army left their barracks for their regular patrols. This meant we would have to cover the stretch in three hours. We were told the road was 'excellent' and that the army even rode motorbikes here sometimes. True, we did see the fading tyre tracks of motorbikes. We trotted at an incredible pace; I don't remember walking so fast ever. Two NSCN(K) officers had stationed themselves with a walkie-talkie much ahead of us, in a position from where they could see the army barracks. Their job was to inform us if the army moved out of the quarters. For the first two hours, there was regular contact and everything was going according to plan until Bharali who was leading the group raised his hand signalling us to stop. He had received a message on the radio from the officers. We stopped on the track, motionless. Bharali shouted back to us saying that movement had been spotted in the barracks and that we may need to take cover at a safe location in the jungle until it was safe to resume. I took the opportunity to sit down under a tree and swallow a good dose of glucose.

But it appeared that the barracks' gates were merely opened, and then shut again after a while. We received a message to carry on. After roughly four hours, we branched off from the road on to a narrow sliding path that went up and then sloped down to a jungle hideout well beyond the reach of the army. Rathin and Bijit who had reached ahead of us had begun to prepare dinner. The next two days were covered leisurely and according to plan. But confusion brewed once again as we reached the last village where the group of ten ULFA boys, who were supposed to receive us, failed to make an

appearance. Radio contact could not be established with any of the centres to pass on the message about our arrival. The radio frequency allowed communication only up to a certain distance.

Marching through the valley was well-nigh impossible without the extra cadres since sakhans were reluctant to go into the area. If they did, they would have to be away from their homes for at least eight days. There was no village for the next 100 kilometre or so, which meant that we would have to carry our provisions of rice and rations ourselves. In addition, there was the danger of encountering bears, elephants and wild dogs.

After much debate, we finally decided to wait and try for radio contact, gather information about the situation in the valley if possible and send Bijit to the previous village to scout for sakhans who would be willing to move with us. There was no further development over the next two days, so I set about exploring this new village. It looked distinctly different from the earlier ones we had visited. There was something eerie about the location, with medium-sized dark hills surrounding the settlement like a fortress on all sides. This village was historically significant. Not very far was a spot where deadly clashes had taken place amongst the cadres of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1988. Supporters loyal to Vice-President Khaplang staged a coup in which General Secretary Thuingaleng Muivah narrowly escaped with his life.

I walked through a large plain area in an east to west direction – a rare privilege for villages in the hills. Rice and vegetables were cultivated throughout the year, consumed and sometimes sold to rebels passing through the area. There was a church on an elevation at the eastern end, but this had been shut for the past one year. Our host said there were no pastors. I touched the rusted lock on the door and saw something written on a board near the entrance that was indecipherable. I climbed further and saw a patch of cleared land behind the hill to the north which was being readied for opium cultivation.

Meanwhile Bijit returned without any sakhan after three days. He had even gone to two other villages in search of people to carry our luggage and rations. We seemed to be stuck. Even if we only carried rice and nothing else, there would be three extra baskets for seven days. As we were mulling over this impasse, somebody yelled from outside asking for Bora. Five ULFA cadres entered our hut and saluted the two senior officers. Heading the group was a tall man who identified himself as Anil. They said five more

boys had pitched tent deep in the jungle, which was about a day's walk from here. Bharali bombarded them with questions about why they had failed to reach on time. Anil's reply was worrying.

'We reached ten days ago, but received inputs about the army's movement in the vicinity. So we decided to withdraw to a safer zone, hang around there and return after some time,' he explained.

'But how's the situation now? And did you manage to get in touch with the headquarters?' Iqbal enquired.

'We have been keeping tabs and there should not be any problems now. We managed to send a message to headquarters about the situation through some Naga officers we met on the way a week ago.' Anil also suggested that we leave early next morning.

Rations were gathered and packed into five baskets in the evening. Rice was getting scarce; there was just about enough for four days or so. We would be in a soup if the road ahead got blocked for any reason or if we had delays in crossing the valley. Dinner had the usual items, but our host gave us something special in a bowl. I thought it was wild boar, but it was not. It was bear, which was shot by somebody in the village in the morning. I took a piece and began to chew. It tasted different, hard and slightly sour. My taste buds weren't exactly happy with it.

3

Valley of No Return

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Unusually for me, I woke up earlier than the rest, finished packing and was ready by 4 a.m. out of sheer excitement. Our destination was getting nearer and the walk was expected to be pleasant. The steep climbs and vertical descents were behind us, and we would have to worry about them only during the return journey. The valley was a treasure trove of flora and fauna and, more to my interest, a site of great historical importance.

In the first half of 1942, the Japanese squeezed the British out of Myanmar. This was the place through which tens of thousands of British soldiers, administrators, businesspersons, and their retinue of Indian servants and workers landed safely in Assam.[1] Thousands were supposed to have died during the trek through the jungle. Hence its reputation as a hostile place where death lurked in every corner. It was also during the Second World War that the famous Stillwell Road was constructed from Ledo in Assam through the northern region of the valley and Kachin to Kunming in south-west China for maintenance of supply lines to the troops resisting the Japanese.

Since there was no sakhan, everybody, except Pradip and I, was overloaded. I was awestruck at their capacity to carry heavy loads and mortified at not being able to do my share. After the meal, we began a gradual descent in single file, with Anil and three others leading the group. The track went through the middle of the hill, over rocks, leaves and fallen branches of trees. The column came to a halt two hours later; the trail was about to change and we were told to take out the khukri from our bags.

'We will now go on an underground route used only by rebel groups. It is much shorter,' said Iqbal, as he adjusted his backpack. Anil clambered down to the right into the jungle and began slashing the shrubs in our path. At least this was no tricky drop. I followed when my turn came without having to hack my way through.

In the afternoon, we reached a big hillock, not far from the valley itself. We stopped to rest and Anil informed us that for the rest of the day, we would

walk along the rocky banks of a creek that rippled its way through the forest about 100 metres below us. And down we went, step by step, in absolute slow motion because the rocks were slippery. I would sometimes hold Iqbal's hand, thrust the staff ahead with my right hand and then make my move. I tripped, not once but thrice. Just a few grazes on my hands, though. That said, the terrain was not very difficult. The landscape was predictable – small- and medium-sized rocks on top of each other on the banks, interspersed with great big boulders – and our trek yo-yoed through easy and difficult bits as we stepped into the water and waded occasionally and then hopped back on to the rocks.

We reached the valley a few minutes past 3 p.m. on the thirty-ninth day of the assignment. The group stopped for rest at a point beside the brook. I had imagined a plain, but the topography consisted mainly of hillocks. The range of the shades of green around was as bewildering as the contours of the hills in the backdrop. What could possibly make this dangerous? Perhaps the drastic weather changes during the summer (which we would, hopefully, never get to experience). And such conditions were ideal breeding ground for the mosquitoes and myriad other lethal insects that swarmed this valley. Not long after, the march started again – this time on a path leading away from the brook and into the jungle. After fifteen minutes, two colourful nylon tents of blue and yellow came into view on a small mound. The five cadres that Anil mentioned yesterday were waiting to receive us. We unpacked our bags and settled down to drink the tea they made for us.

One of those men, bearded, in his early forties, said that the army was on a recce to check if the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) had set up camps in this region. After several years of a tenuous truce, war had broken out between the Kachin and the Myanmarese government six months ago. However, they assured us that there was no reason for any worry now. Three more tents were erected with bamboo and covered with polythene sheets. Another group began cooking our dinner. I undid my wet shoes and sat enjoying the cold breeze that had begun to blow outside the tent.

Next morning, preparing food for seventeen people delayed our start. Then within minutes, the men ahead of us stopped moving.

'What's the matter?' Pradip shouted.

'Is it the army again?' I asked.

Bora signalled to us to be silent. As if to confirm our fears, three gunshots were heard in quick succession. The sound was faint and it seemed to be

coming from some distance away. So we might have to run, I thought, but from whom?

'Just keep following me in case we have to take a different route and do whatever I ask you to do,' Iqbal said, looking a bit worried even as he unholstered his 9 mm pistol.

Pradip and I had already stepped a few feet away from the path into the jungle, certain that we would head another way. But Anil strolled back towards us with a grin – it was not the army, only a boar. The two cadres who led the group had fired at it, but it had managed to escape. Better luck next time, I told them, and we resumed the walk. We would pass two more ideal hunting spots over the coming days, he said. Farther down, we managed to catch a glimpse of a deer that bolted like lightning upon seeing us, saw trees that had been mauled and pulled down by elephants, and areas dug up by wild boars.

We halted for the night beside a waterfall. The next morning, the hunting party came back late and empty- handed. The following day was just as luckless; our chances of tasting wild boar were growing dim. Instead, blast fishing was resorted to, of which I had heard a lot since it was a common practice in many areas of the north-east.

It was surprisingly simple. About 50 grams of TNT (trinitrotoluene) was packed in polythene with a fuse extending out, which was lit and lobbed into the river. The river was shallow, perhaps just about four to five feet in depth. Three people waded about 15 metres downstream with a mosquito net. A dull thud and, moments later, several fish broke surface, some dead, others in a dead faint. There was a lot of fish – too much to eat *and* carry. The biggest was a local variety of mahseer weighing around 3 kg. Like pork, it was boiled and sprinkled with salt and tiny leaves plucked from a plant on the bank of the stream. It had an interesting sour taste without the turmeric or spices of Indian fish recipes. More were netted in another stream. Our stock of rice was rapidly dwindling.

'What if we run out of rice?' I asked Iqbal.

'I think there should be just about enough. When we reach the river tomorrow, you will set sail in boats.'

'I admit we were a little upset with you for not giving us a clear picture about the distance.'

'We were unsure of it ourselves. The situation is unpredictable and could have taken a lot longer to reach the destination.'

It was still dark when I woke up the next morning. I got ready, ventured out of the tent when daylight broke and was greeted by a sight that remained stamped on my mind for the rest of the day. My diary of the day reads:

I was about to brush my teeth when I saw two people walking in the direction we were supposed to proceed. When I caught up with them, I saw a blind woman who looked almost eighty years old, hand in hand with a young lad, and holding a bamboo staff in her other hand. She seemed very familiar with the path, and navigated its quirks effortlessly. They managed to speak some broken Nagamese and I began chatting with them. They were migrating from their village in the hills to a new settlement in the plains. They said they were part of a fourteen-member group on the march and the other members were just behind them.

The old lady was called Nimai and the boy was her grandson, Zaipa. She came from a village close to the one where we were forced to spend four nights in a row. The sight of her walking in the jungle made me uncomfortable but she seemed very sure-footed and unafraid. She said she had been born blind but the handicap had never been a hurdle in her day-to-day life. She went on to add that she had got married at an early age, gave birth to five children, and wandered around in the village without any problem. I told them to wait while I fetched the camera even

though I knew I was not supposed to shoot during the onward journey. But this was too good an opportunity to be missed, and I decided I would confess my transgression to the ULFA leaders immediately upon reaching the camp.

Nimai was yet another testimony to the toughness of the Nagas and the hardship they can endure. Perhaps it was with a view to making life easier that they had decided to migrate to the plains at least 100 kilometres away from their habitat in the hills. Nimai and Zaipa soon left me behind and proceeded on their way, walking at a pace which was on par with mine …

We hit the trail early, but had to give way to a convoy of five elephants steered by olive-clad Kachin Independence Army (KIA) mahouts. The men chopped tree branches with khukris to clear the path as they slowly forged ahead. The mid-sized elephants seemed suited to walking the narrow hill trails.

'But KIA? They are not supposed to be here. This is not their territory?' I was confused because the Kachin were not supposed to be very amicable to the Nagas.

'Yes, they come here to capture elephants after the rains stop. If they catch two, one would have to be given to the NSCN,' Iqbal replied.

'But didn't the KIA confiscate land belonging to the Nagas? That's what we had heard, although I'm not very sure.'

'They might have, long ago. But there is no conflict as such between the two now. Both are neighbours after all, and both stand to gain if cordial relations are maintained.'

We met four more KIA cadres who had pitched their tent close to our night halt. I approached an officer, who I learnt was called Sam, beside the bonfire after dinner.

‘How’s the situation in Kachin now?’ I asked.

‘They (the Myanmarese army) now have their backs against the wall. They have been beaten badly,’ he answered in broken English and took a deep drag of a local cigar.

‘Has the war ended? Or is it still on?’

‘No it’s still on, and we will continue fighting.’

‘Any chance that it may end soon?’

‘Can’t say for sure, but they will eventually get tired and have to accept our terms sooner than later.’

So the war was on. Just a few weeks before we set out on our journey, there were efforts at a ceasefire between the KIA and the Myanmarese army. At one point, we were unsure whether it would be safe to undertake this assignment. The media reports were, as usual, quoting intelligence sources that ULFA had set up camps along Kachin’s border with China and we were certain that we would be taken through the conflict zone.[2] Then I decided it was worth the risk; it would even be another great experience to go to a KIA camp and cover the war. Perhaps after the interviews with the ULFA chief of staff and other rebel leaders were done. It would be an opportunity to observe at close quarters a genuinely revolutionary outfit that had established a government, schools and hospitals in the areas they controlled and was fighting one of the most atrocious regimes on earth.

Kachin had a long history of association with insurgents from India’s north-east. Back in the late 1960s and ’70s, the KIA had allowed the Naga National Council (NNC) and Mizo National Front to send batches to China for training through its territory. In the 1980s, it trained hundreds of cadres belonging to Manipur’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and ULFA.[3] These training facilities were shut down following a pact between the KIA and India’s external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). In return, the Kachin were supplied consignments of weapons shipped through Vijaynagar in Arunachal Pradesh. A close relation between the two organizations has since continued, and the KIA even has an officer stationed in New Delhi.[4]

This was a great loss for the north-east rebels. So the ULFA got in touch with Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and arrangements were made for cadres to receive training in the AfPak region. This was sophisticated training, but brief, and imparted to small groups. There was no dearth of

weapons and ammunition; there were no diseases, jungles or any fear of being sniped by rival forces. After the training in weapons ended, the batch would be divided into even smaller groups for specialized courses in espionage, bomb making and radio communication. On many occasions, cadres were trained at the Pakistani army headquarters in Rawalpindi.[5] What was missing, however, was the first-hand experience of operations against the Myanmarese army that many ULFA cadres availed in Kachin, and field knowledge of guerrilla warfare. I bombarded Sam with questions, particularly if the north-east rebels had actually set up camps further north. But he and his comrades revealed nothing when I posed queries to them casually on a few occasions.

The conversation with Sam dragged on until late that night. Although I got no truly surprising information out of him, it was fascinating, and distressing, to listen to his accounts of the war. The fallout in Kachin could have a bearing on India's north-east and the geopolitics of the region. And many countries, including India, are keenly observing the unfolding situation.

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In 1961, the KIA was formed to fight for independence, but it later gave up the demand, instead making a case for autonomy. In 1994, after the ceasefire agreement between the KIA and the Myanmarese military junta, there came the hope for a settlement to the conflict. Guns fell silent for the first time in more than three decades, but the government did not seem interested in a negotiated settlement that would have redressed the grievances of the Kachin. It was much the same with insurgent groups in other regions of the country that came overground after a truce.

Not surprisingly, hostilities in Kachin erupted on 9 June 2011 following an offensive by the Myanmarese army on KIA-controlled Momauk. The army wanted control over projects financed by Chinese companies, including hydel schemes and oil, and gas pipelines that passed through the region. Some analysts are of the view that the war was in fact provoked by China to protect its own interests. The attack came close on the heels of a letter sent to the Chinese government by the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO), the political arm of KIA, making a case for the withdrawal of investment from the multi-billion dollar Myitsone dam in Kachin. It cautioned them that the proposed 152-metre-high dam, which was being financed by the China Power Investment Co. Ltd, would displace thousands of people, and local

resentment could fuel serious disturbances.[6]

This dam was the first in a series of seven projects on the Upper Irrawaddy that, according to environmentalists, would irreversibly change the lives of millions of people who lived downstream. The Irrawaddy delta, the source of most of Myanmar's rice production, would be adversely affected. Chinese companies operating the projects would have control over water levels in Myanmar's most important river, and significantly alter transport, fishing and farming patterns that have been in existence for centuries. The benefits of these schemes appeared to be limited to royalties for the Myanmarese government. According to media reports, the lion's share of the power generated was intended to be exported to China. In any case, the tension between the two sides had been brewing over the past few months prior to this incident. Earlier, in September 2010, the KIO had rejected the Myanmarese junta's proposal of the Border Guard Force (BGF) plan, which would have subjugated the KIA under Myanmarese military command. KIA made a case for a genuine federal state but the army retaliated by shutting its liaison offices in Kachin. To add fuel to the fire, Myanmar's Election Commission rejected the registration of three Kachin political parties from running in the country's first national elections in twenty years on the plea that the party leaders were linked with the KIA.

Sam said the war was a result of the government's 'attitude' towards the hill people. 'It's difficult to say what would have happened if General Aung San had lived for a few more years. Perhaps the war would not have dragged on for so long, although nothing can be said with certainty,' he explained, referring to the mistrust that had developed between the two sides over the years. 'So the situation is highly unpredictable. The government was treating Kachin like its colony. Now they planned to reap the benefits by installing all kinds of projects for extracting the resources of the region.'

Many dispassionate observers of Myanmar shared Sam's view. The historic Panglong Agreement of 1947, which was masterminded by General Aung San, envisaged bringing Kachin, Shan and Chin into the mainstream by granting them autonomy and ensuring their participation in the decision-making process. The situation changed after the general was assassinated in the following year and the agreement was put in cold storage. Although the ceasefire was shaky, the KIO attended the National Convention in 2008 for drafting a constitution. Its proposal for setting up a federal structure on the basis of the Panglong Agreement was, however, rejected by the junta.

Several rounds of talks had already been held between the two sides for defusing the current crisis, but neither side appeared to be willing to climb down from its stance. According to Sam, the government had suffered much more in the war than the KIA. He claimed that KIA had more than 20,000 soldiers under its command and were distributed all over the region in five brigades to check the army's advances. Media reports, however, indicate that both sides suffered equally in the war. According to one estimate, around 100 soldiers of the KIA and about sixty civilians lost their lives in addition to more than 80,000 people who were displaced.[7] The Myanmarese army had faced difficulties maintaining the supply lines because of frequent ambushes by the KIA. As a result, the offensive decelerated. To prevent the conflict from escalating, President Thein Sein issued an order directing the army to cease all offensives except for defence purposes. The Myitsone dam project was suspended, the Border Guard Force programme was no longer an issue, and the UN agencies were allowed access to refugee camps in areas under the KIA's control. But there was no sign of the conflict drawing to a close. The army deployed more troops, and human rights abuses continued unabated.

It was already 10 p.m. and I really ought to have retired (and let Sam go to bed), but I had so many questions for Sam. 'Where do you get your weapons and ammunition from?'

'That's not a problem. We have multiple sources and we also manufacture some on our own.'

Manufacture? What I had heard earlier about production of assault rifles in Kachin seemed to be true after all. 'Where do you get the raw materials from?'

'Again, multiple sources and that's also not a problem.'

He did not want to disclose more. Perhaps he did not know more. It would have been wonderful to visit the factory and see the process, but such units were usually located deep in safe locations that required months of travel to get to. I finally told him that I sometimes wrote about conflicts in newspapers and magazines under a pseudonym, but stopped short of revealing that I was a journalist.

'Tell me Sam, will it be safe for us to go to the war zone?'

'It all depends. If there is a full-scale offensive, it is of course it is not advisable. But I have heard there were some foreign journalists who had been to the war zones with cameras some months ago.'

‘Have they gone back or are they still holed up there?’

‘I don’t know. They may have left.’ Sam appeared to be sleepy.

‘Are you trained in the art of elephant capture?’ I asked, hoping he would shrug off his drowsiness.

‘No. Not me. My other friends are, and I have come because an officer has to be present on such assignments as per our agreement with the government here.’

‘Government means the GPRN and NSCN(K) … right? And are you always successful in capturing elephants?’

‘Not really. Sometimes we are unsuccessful. It depends on a lot of factors, but this place is swarming with elephants.’ He got up, stretched and yawned, and prepared to leave.

‘I presume you need elephants for transportation purposes, right?’

‘Yes. There is no other option in our region and especially when a war is on.’

I shook hands with him. ‘I wish you good luck. Your people are brave and I am sure victory will be yours.’

‘Thank you.’

The others in my group were asleep in the tents. As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered whether there was any chance I could visit the nearest war zone. Not long ago, somebody said that there had been skirmishes between the two sides at a spot some 50 kilometres away from the camp we were heading to. KIA had been successful in driving the army away and establishing its own camps. I surmised that rebel groups would be in touch with each other, and it may not be difficult for ULFA or NSCN(K) to send us with escorts. Of course, it all depended on how events panned out after we reached the camp and how quickly we were able to finish the interviews.

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Iqbal informed us that we would be at the camp the following evening. We would reach the river too late to be able to sail down in motorboats that day. Our group would hand us over to another lot and proceed to a different camp. They said they would go to the camp to meet us before we left for our return journey.

There were no more of the pretty hillocks that we had become accustomed to over the past five days. The temperature was a bit higher now, the vegetation thicker and there were no brooks cutting through the pathway. Instead, there were dry branches and sometimes entire fallen trees blocking

our path. We then entered a labyrinth of bamboo not unlike the spinney of banana plants of a few days ago. There was nothing but bamboo, some green, some dry, that criss-crossed each other to form a maze that was spectacular and risky at the same time. Even if a path existed, its traces had been obscured. At times the cluster underfoot collapsed under our body weight and our feet would sink in making a typical sound. We moved at a snail's pace, twisting, turning and ensuring that splinters did not pierce the thin rubber soles of our shoes. It took more than an hour to negotiate that 2-kilometre stretch.

It was noon and time for a break. The group assembled in a small clearing under a tree. Bora had something to offer us that had us worried again. He handed Pradip and me strips of pills from his bag.

'This is anti-malaria, sir. One tablet every day until you leave this place,' Bora clarified.

'OK. So this guarantees that we don't contract malaria,' I said.

'Yes. Nothing will happen if you bear certain things in mind.'

'Like?'

'Never sit down in one place for long, whether in the jungle or the camp. Unless, of course, if you are around a fireplace. Always wear long pants and jackets, don't sleep without the mosquito net, don't lie on the bed in the afternoon …'

The list was endless, and we promised to faithfully abide by his instructions. The local term for malaria was mokhlong. But Bora pointed out that during the hot season, excessive consumption of salt or sour items like lemon also resulted in symptoms similar to it. How could there be malaria without mosquito bites? It was difficult to believe, but I recalled that ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa had told me long ago that mokhlong could be contracted if water was drunk from streams in certain areas.

The symptoms were weakness, body ache and convulsions leading to death in two weeks if medication was not administered. In fact, all rebel outfits had lost cadres to mokhlong in this region. 'There is a surprisingly effective local cure to the ailment,' Bora said. 'However, it is extremely painful. The body is scraped continuously with an abrasive object, most often this would be the perforated bottom of a small tin can (which had perhaps contained tinned fish originally) or a bottle grenade. The veins in the throat are also massaged and pulled, and the exercise is repeated for a few days at a stretch. And voila! The sick person starts walking after a week and is back to his normal

activities.' This was enough to give us the jitters.

Pradip and I swallowed one tablet each and got ready to resume the march. Just as we began the trek, a group of armed rebels dressed in jungle fatigues came into view and strode towards us. Although Pradip and I were alarmed, our companions hailed the new arrivals cheerfully. Soon they were shaking hands and speaking in Nagamese that was a bit different from the one spoken by the Nagas. They were all from Manipur and allies of NSCN(K).

Of the fifteen in the group, six were from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). I was able to identify them by the 'P L Army' tag above their shirt pockets. The rest, Iqbal told us later, were from People's Republican Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL). Each of them toted a bulging rucksack and an assault rifle that was either an AK-81 or an M-16. They only said they were en route to Manipur either through Nagaland or directly through the Somra Tract in Myanmar. We bade them goodbye and began to walk the last stretch in the valley towards the river.

I prodded Iqbal for more information about the rebel groups from Manipur. He named four more outfits that had a presence in eastern Nagaland – United National Liberation Front (UNLF), a splinter group of the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and two factions of PREPAK – PREPAK (Progressive) and UPPK. Their camps were in close proximity to each other wherever they existed in this region in order to be strategically placed to assist each other in times of crisis – especially if the army were to launch a raid. Their common goal was to achieve independence for Manipur.

UNLF was the oldest and biggest among them with a cadre strength of around 2,500 to 3,000.[8] It came into being in 1964, but its force depleted marginally after a split in 1994 when a faction under the leadership of Namoijam Oken walked out to float KYKL. Occupying the second position in terms of numbers was PLA that was formed in 1978 after its first batch returned from training in China. It was the first to tie up with the undivided NSCN and set up camps in eastern Nagaland in the early 1980s. Some of its top functionaries stay in China and have close links with the Second Department, the intelligence wing of the Chinese armed forces.

We forded a small stream on foot, crossed two big hillocks that appeared out of nowhere and finally arrived at the most charming spot in the entire journey. There were few trees but there were long creepers that festooned the place as if it had been deliberately fashioned. I supposed there were ingredients in the soil that favoured certain kinds of vegetation at particular

locations. I wanted to stop and look around, but the pace of the march had picked up and everybody was determined to reach the river at the earliest.

At 3.30 p.m., we finally heard the sound of the river and reached the bank shortly afterward to find a group waiting to receive us. Leading the squad was a short, sturdy man in his mid-forties. I felt he had to be Bijoy 'Chinese' Das, a confidant of the chief. And indeed he was. Pradip had met him earlier at a camp in Arunachal Pradesh in 2007 when a few journalists were taken to cover the outfit's Raising Day on 7 April.

'I am Rajeev,' I said shaking hands with him. 'And you are Bijoy Chinese?'

'Yes, I am … Welcome.'

'We have heard a lot about you. But you don't look Chinese at all.'

'And you don't seem to have changed at all, buddy,' Pradip said and embraced him.

'We have been waiting for you since yesterday. Why did you take so long?' Bijoy asked as we settled down under a
big tree.

'We are not trained to walk in this terrain like you. But tell me, why are you known as "Chinese"?'

'The name was given many years ago by Tapan Barua who was former commander of the 28th Battalion and it
has stuck.'

In the team of ten cadres were three women in their mid-twenties, all in fatigues with either 9 mm pistols or AK-81 assault rifles. They served tea and biscuits while the others began arranging bamboo and leaves for the camp shelters. A total of six were erected, including a separate one for the women. The campsite covered quite a large area on the river bank. Satellite images would have surely transmitted the impression of a new rebel hideout somewhere in eastern Nagaland and this would have grabbed media headlines, I told Bijoy. Two motor boats fitted with Kenbo engines were moored to big rocks on the bank.

The hunting parties had returned empty-handed again, so once again the squad resorted to blast fishing, the catch from which we ate for both dinner and the morning meal. I slept early, looking forward to the boat ride the next day. I longed to use my camera. Perhaps photographs would be allowed on the return journey. If it were, I intended to fully exploit the opportunity as far as the four batteries I was carrying would permit. If at all possible, I would try and recharge them with the solar panels I had seen in some houses up in

the hills.

The parting was sad. Except for the doctor who would sail down with us, the rest of the group we had travelled so far with and some of Bijoy's squad would continue on foot in another direction to a different camp. After the meal, all the cadres lined up in two columns to bid us farewell. Pradip and I hugged each one of them and then perched ourselves on the boat's wooden plank. Das was at the bow and a young cadre in his early thirties steered with a rudder at the stern. The engine roared to life and took the boat into the water; the other boat following close behind with our bags and three cadres. The water was shallower than I expected. At some places, the river bed was clearly visible. But the engines propelled the boat at a moderate speed of about 15 kilometres per hour. Whenever small islets appeared in the middle of the river, we cut speed to navigate carefully, ensuring the propellers were not damaged by the submerged rocks and logs or accidentally run aground.

It was 8 a.m., and the fog was yet to subside. The cool breeze ran through the landscape that appeared to have remained undisturbed for thousands of years. A moderately dense foliage of trees and shrubs lined the undulated banks. Occasionally, we passed small rocky cliffs, at the base of which were innumerable small crevices, the emerald-green water lapping at them. It was easy to forget that this was an ecologically threatened region.[9] When the current was strong, we switched off the engines, and everyone fell silent as it was time to float and stay alert. A herd of elephants trumpeted nearby, a falcon soared overhead and we heard the howling of monkeys.

Around noon, we stopped for tea and cold rice. As firewood was gathered and a fire lit on the sandbank, I looked around. Just above the water level, I noticed perforated rocks; the tiny holes seemed machine-drilled. No one could tell us precisely who punched them or why. Out of curiosity, I poked a twig into one of them but nothing emerged. Somebody reckoned that it had been done by a fish with spiky teeth for laying eggs during the rainy season. If that were the case, this fish species would be just as deadly as the piranha.

Bijoy said the boats would come to a halt before nightfall. From there, 'just a few hours' walk' would take us to the place where we would unpack and rest for a while. I sincerely hoped it would not be another 'few hours' from there to the camp. We were tired and desperate to take a break, relax, take a bath and put on clean clothes. Pradip and I exchanged seats when we resumed our river cruise. Patches of cleared forests became visible on the right bank, indicating the presence of human habitation nearby.

‘Who has cultivated all these?’ I asked Bijoy.

‘The villagers, of course. They live not very far.’

‘And they have migrated from the hills? But why have we not seen a single human being so far?’

‘Yes, the movement started long ago and is still continuing. You will see a village at the place where we will stop for a while for fuel.’

At 2 p.m., a cluster of huts came into view on the left bank. We drew near and switched off the engines. Two men jumped out of the other boat, carrying jerrycans for diesel, and walked up the narrow trail to a house in the middle of the small settlement. They returned with the fuel and topped up the tanks of the boats. But where had the fuel come from? I wanted to ask Bijoy, but did not, thinking that he may not want to disclose details. The light was beginning to fade and we were told that our destination was only about 15 kilometres away.

We stopped before dark at the foot of a cliff of moderate height and walked through gaps in the rocks to arrive in the plains. But there was a two-hour trek with torchlights before we reached a tiny hamlet. We unpacked and sat down on the porch of a cosy hut. When Bijoy informed the ULFA camp about our location over radio, he was instructed not to wait in the village for too long.

‘How far is the camp from here?’ I asked.

‘Two-and-a-half hours on foot. But both of you will be taken on motorbikes and your bags will be carried to the camp by our boys,’ Bijoy replied.

‘So there must be roads here then.’

‘Yes. Untarred and newly cut.’

Very soon, I rode with a young Naga boy and Pradip sat pillion on Bijoy’s motorbike. Within seconds, I realized that the ‘plain and newly cut’ road was just as treacherous as some of the tracks in the hills. It was a nerve-racking obstacle course of a ride the entire way, with tree stumps, shrubs and rocks strewn on the road. I was quite worried I’d sprain or break an ankle if I tripped here. We alighted practically every five minutes to negotiate uneven patches and, at one point, pushed the bike over an ascent on a hillock. Then came a narrow bamboo bridge that dipped precariously as we rode over it. I was amazed it did not collapse.

We finally set foot in the camp at around 8 p.m. on 22 November, on the forty-third day of our journey. It was dark and all I could make out were some huts in the compound and cadres in their uniforms lined up in two

columns to receive us. The camp commander, who introduced himself as Michael Deka Phukan, shook hands with us and led us to the kitchen. By now, we would have eaten anything at all. The rice and chicken cooked with tangy herbs tasted like manna. After dinner, we walked over a wooden footbridge across a rivulet and through winding steps to the guest hut on a hillock. A solar lamp lay in a corner providing ample light to the room. There were two bamboo cots tidily made with sheets, blankets and mosquito nets, two tables and two clothes racks. There was hot water in a large bucket behind our room and I had a refreshing bath. Our rucksacks had just arrived, so there were clean clothes to be had as well. I lay down on the hard bed and slept a dreamless, thoughtless sleep.

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I woke at a rather late 8 a.m., settled myself on a chair and surveyed the surroundings. The camp area was a mix of flatlands and hillocks. Our hut was almost at the centre of the site, which gave me an overview of the entire place. Forests and knolls lay to the north and west, while it was wholly flat land in the other directions. The rivulet that meandered through the camp divided the settlement into two equal halves. Beyond the jungle were the hills; some were near and seemed to be only a few hours' walk away. However, the range of hills in the east looked surreal, like paintings hung on a wall. The terrain seemed to be at a vantage point, I thought, to give resistance and engage in a dogfight if somebody were to attack the place, and big enough to ramble and explore if we felt bored or were holed up for too long. There were rumours that the chief of staff, Baruah, had been injured last September in a shelling. Did it happen here? And, if perchance it were to happen again, how would we escape?

Pradip had joined me by then, so I asked him the question.

'It's difficult to say. But I am sure they will take us to safer locations in case of danger,' he replied.

'Yes, maybe. We will just rest, eat and sleep for the next two days. And then we will start wandering around.'

'But is this the same place we have been hearing about for so long and that the media speculated on so much?'

'I think so. We will get all the confirmations soon.'

We were summoned to the kitchen for a meal and briefed by a young cadre about the camp's daily schedule. As in all rebel camps, the first meal was served at 7 a.m., followed by another at 2 p.m. If we wished, we would also

be able to play volleyball in the field with the cadres in the evening. However, we were not to leave the camp until the seniors arrived. We negotiated our own mealtimes to 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. A television near our hut quickly became our lifeline. We were watching news from Assam after a long time. Hindi channels were barred, and we refrained from breaking the norm.

The camp was silent the whole day, except in the evening when it was time for sports and games. Only forty-odd cadres were based at the location; two of them were also wives of senior functionaries. On the second day of our arrival, we saw a woman weeping and enquired upon the reason. Her husband was on a command to blow up the rail track at Sivasagar. He had been equipped with RDX and a new technology that promised to have devastating effects. It required meticulous handling – right composition of the ingredients and precision of pressure. Something went awry, and he had blown himself to pieces before the bomb could be planted.

The next day, I met her in the kitchen after dinner. I identified myself as Captain Nipen Das and offered my condolences, but did not know what to say beyond that. Her composure as she went about her daily chores was remarkable.

'No revolution can succeed without sacrifices,' she said. 'Many have laid down their lives; many more will follow the same path. My husband has set an example for the others to emulate.' At this point, she broke down and wept again, and couldn't say any more. I was at a loss for words, and retired to the hut disquieted.

Will she surrender now? Or continue with her life in the camp? I recalled a similar instance at a camp of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) at Assam's Karbi Anglong some years ago. Then it was a teenage girl whose parents and younger brother had fallen prey to a rival militant group. She saved herself from the marauders by hiding beneath a bed, and was later brought and trained in the camp by the group. She had vowed revenge against her family's killers. I thought it would be an interesting story, but found only tears rolling down her cheeks as I asked
her questions.

Most rebel groups in India's north-east have women in their ranks with clearly defined roles, but there are few examples of them rising up the hierarchy to positions of eminence. Like the child soldiers among some outfits here, women are usually not allowed to take part in ambushes or other

operations that involve danger. Sometimes they are used as informers and may also be allowed to go for patrolling in groups near the camps. They are looked after well and provided with escorts whenever they are shifted from one place to another. Nonetheless, their daily schedule in the camps is as tough as their male counterparts' – getting up early morning for the drills, two meals a day and the daily errands. No case of capital punishment for any woman has come to light so far either in the north-east or eastern Nagaland.

I sat down to watch the evening news on TV, and was stumped by another development. ULFA had nominated a new central executive committee of sixteen members. The rift between the pro-talks group, headed by Chairman Rajkhowa and the anti-talks group, led by Baruah, now seemed to be complete.

I heard the anchor read out the names in the committee, which were naturally fictitious since everybody assumed a different identity after joining the outfit. There was hardly any reaction from the inmates in the camp about this newly constituted committee. Bijoy and Deka Phukan had been included, but they did not seem excited about it as they watched the news. The former had been made commander of the eastern zone, which included the Upper Assam districts bordering Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Perhaps they had already been informed about this decision. I was now especially keen to meet the new acting chairman, Dr Avijit Barman, whose name I was hearing for the first time. News channels speculated about his identity, but nobody knew for sure. I drew up three possible names, including a UK-based doctor who had been associated with ULFA since 1990. We were told that it was likely he would accompany Baruah to the camp.

Interestingly, Chairman Rajkhowa was not expelled from ULFA, unlike the other senior functionaries who had joined forces with him for dialogue with the government. It was possible that Baruah still hoped that he would return to the fold. Or perhaps, he wanted to convey the message that he was all for burying the hatchet for the sake of unity in the organization. Many names that figured in the list were hitherto low-profiled senior members who had refused to surrender so far. Six of them had already arrived at the camp for the meetings with Baruah.

Jibon Moran, the second-in-command of ULFA and the oldest person in the organization, came in next day. As we sat with him, discussing the journey and the hiccups so far, Pradip impressed upon him the need to inform the chief of staff that we were getting delayed. But I advised Pradip to be patient.

There was no other option – I was not going to return empty-handed after coming so far. We had to make the most of this assignment.

In the evening, we took a stroll with Moran, the first time we stepped out of the camp. The settlement was surrounded by grass, shrubs and trees in every direction but the north, where a tract of land was cultivated by villagers from a nearby settlement. A narrow potholed path passed through the undergrowth in a zigzag manner. This region was an extension of the valley that we had just passed through and stretched further north and east into the Kachin hills. On our way back to the camp, we asked him the expected date of Baruah's arrival at the camp. He did not know; he too would be informed of the chief's programme only a few days in advance.

So we settled down to a routine of evening walks on that route either with Moran or some senior cadre, watching TV and reading the few newspapers that trickled in. On the route we took was also a small shop selling cigarettes, vegetables, chocolates and other eatables. We dropped in here sometimes during our stay to pick up a few items. The fatigue was petering out and the sores from the damdim's bites were drying after we began applying an ointment that was given to us at the camp. We chatted with cadres whenever we could to gather information, but they were mostly taciturn. We were beginning to enjoy this unscheduled holiday when, one fine day, we were informed that a group would soon leave to receive Baruah. Things had begun to move at last.

A day later, I heard a young cadre yell to his mates early in the morning to quickly assemble at the parade ground. Scrambling out of bed, I saw about ten cadres in their typical attire – jungle fatigue, pouch on the waist belt, rifle and magazines – solemnly lined up in two neat columns. There was an undeniable sense of urgency to them. A slim man in his late thirties, Naren Barua, led the group. Their task was to provide foolproof security to the chief of staff who was on his way to the camp. The group trooped out of the camp after being briefed by Bijoy and Moran.

Days later, long after the chief had arrived at the camp, we managed to get fascinating snippets of information about their journey from those cadres. The excited and charged-up squad had marched to a spot 70 kilometres north-west of the camp to receive him. There they waited at a fixed spot for the chief whose routes were as secret as his place of residence. He tended to emerge out of nowhere either ahead of schedule or days later. He was extra careful this time around. The Indian intelligence agencies were on an

overdrive to apprehend him. Since 2009, they had been aware that Baruah was frequenting this region. He had had a series of meetings to chair, the first of which was after the new executive committee had been announced. The road map and strategy of the new executive committee would be debated and fine-tuned, finances streamlined and new sources of income tapped. He would have to address cadres undergoing training and shore up their motivation levels. This was his first detailed interview to journalists in a camp. He had to arrive, finish the work and sneak out safely.

Bijoy revealed that Baruah had originally planned to reach the rebel base in early October, but had to cancel. There was a sudden escalation of conflict in some of the regions he was scheduled to pass through, and there was simply no way that security could be guaranteed. Two days into the journey, he had had to stop and return to his residence. Two weeks later, he received the green signal from his trusted aides and set out once again. But a week later, trouble brewed again, routes were blocked and there was no possibility of retreating to safer areas. Fortunately, the camps he stayed in were located away from the crossfire of the warring parties. After three days, one route was cleared and the squad scraped through, just in time to avoid a fresh eruption.

Meanwhile, the group under Naren had reached a stream in the afternoon and sailed downstream on two motorboats for a couple of hours before coming to a halt below a small cliff. The cadres had moored their boats and scaled the precipice to pick up the trail. They were aiming to cover the distance within two days and reach their destination to await the chief's arrival. The area was supposedly safe and devoid of the presence of hostile forces. They started walking early the next morning and reached the intended spot three hours after sunset. Further movement would take place only after they received radioed instructions. A message received late in the evening on the third day said that the chief's arrival would be delayed by a few hours.

The walkie-talkie began to bleep again at around 2 a.m. Naren woke up, put the device to his ear and responded to the call. A brief silence was followed by a long coded message informing him that Baruah would arrive at their camp in a few hours. 'There is no need for further advance. Please ensure security and begin survey of the area … over,' the message said. It was still dark. With the break of dawn, the boys went out to recce and take up positions in the area. A radius of around half a kilometre was inspected and the necessary arrangements made to receive the chief. Unending long hours

dragged by and it was only an hour after sunrise that the chief was spotted at a distance along a narrow path, walking briskly with four men who were armed to the teeth.

Among the reception committee were at least five cadres who had never met Baruah before. The scattered boys quickly assembled and lined up in two columns. A group of five men walked towards them, the man in the middle wearing a golf cap, black jacket and green trousers. The boys saluted him and received the bags carried by the group. The chief's companions shook hands with the ULFA cadres but refrained from talking. They left the camp soon after tea and vanished into the jungles. Baruah chatted with the boys for an hour until brunch was served. They were to begin the journey to the camp in the afternoon and halt for the night near a stream.

Back at the camp, we were tipped off by a cadre that Baruah was expected to arrive anytime now. So we fixed our attention on the entry and exit points and at 10 p.m. concluded that his arrival would be late and shrouded in secrecy. But the next morning, he had still not arrived. Finally, at 9 p.m., a column of blazing lights approached the camp from the south-east direction. The thumping of boots grew louder as the group drew up to Baruah's chamber below the hillock where our hut was located. A neon bulb blinked into being. Bags were carried into the hut and more cadres assembled at the spot. I was certain that Baruah had arrived and tried to catch a glimpse of the man, but the trees obstructed my view. He would probably meet us tomorrow since he would be tired after the long walk. I was preparing to go to sleep when there was a knock on the door. It was Bijoy and he appeared upbeat.

'Are you asleep?' he said from the door.

'No. Come in.' I switched on the solar-powered neon lamp.

'Sir has arrived and he wants to know if it's possible for you to see him now.'

The days of waiting were finally over. Excitedly, I picked up the gift that I had brought for him. Pradip was also ready, and we ran down the stairs and across the small wooden footbridge over the brook and took the left turn towards his chamber. A dark-complexioned man was sitting cross-legged by the fireplace surrounded by four bodyguards armed with AK-81 rifles. I slowed down to a walk and looked at Baruah from a distance. Wearing a black jacket and camouflage trousers, he was gazing serenely into the fire. Was this man actually Paresh Baruah? Was he the rebel leader who had successfully thwarted all attempts to nab or eliminate him? He looked

different from the photographs I had seen. Dissimilar perhaps because he was now clean-shaven, a bit heavier and his face was a little more lined, which was to be expected of a man approaching sixty. But he was anything but tired after the arduous journey.

He stood up with a smile as we approached, shook our hands and asked us to be seated. Yes, it was the same soft, youthful voice that I had been hearing for years on the telephone. He was indeed the man we had come to meet.

'So, is everything fine with you?' he queried.

'Yes, we are good. This place is very nice,' Pradip and I replied.

'I am glad you are enjoying your stay here. I hope you didn't mind waiting, but I got delayed due to unavoidable circumstances.'

'Not at all. We liked the trek, even though it was dangerous and tiring at times. This place is so very different from the city, so full of greenery, no pollution and, above all, no office. But, of course, we are a little homesick now.'

'I cannot help but wonder why you took so long to reach here. Our boys make it in half the time.'

'Frankly speaking, we don't have the energy of your boys. Opportunities for long assignments in the hills don't come frequently.'

He grinned. 'But you were supposed to be doing exercises regularly.'

'Yes, I did exercise in preparation for this trip, but now I realize that there is a vast difference between walking in the plains and hiking through the hills.'

For the next ten minutes, we discussed our journey: the villages and hideouts we passed through and the food we ate. We answered all his questions. I narrated my accident on our very first day, and later how we languished at a stopover when we were asked to halt for a few days following a sudden change in the situation.

'I have brought a small gift for you,' he said and pulled out two black jackets for Pradip and me from a bag near his chair.

And I presented him with a magnetic chessboard I had brought, knowing his fondness for the game.

We returned to our room after approximately half an hour. I reviewed our brief interaction with him as I lay on my bed. He was suave, soft-spoken and diplomatic. But first impressions could be deceptive. The criticism from a section of surrendered cadres about his autocratic style of functioning could not be ignored. Some among the people who were close to him in

Bangladesh were of the view that he hated being criticized or opposed. At any rate, we were delighted that we would not have to return home empty-handed and lose face for not having completed our assignment. Our family and friends would also be very anxious by now about our safety and whereabouts. We had not spoken to them for almost two months.

Again, there was a knock on the door. This time, it was a young cadre who said the chief would meet us again at 9 a.m. the next day. I woke up early and found Baruah already seated with Pradip and Bijoy. We spoke for about an hour, mainly about issues back home, and the chief seemed to be beginning to feel comfortable with us. We were desperately hoping to firm up dates for the interview at the earliest possible. There were so many questions to be asked, and the new developments made our arrival all the more timely.

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The Chief and I

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Paresh Baruah was as much an enigma to functionaries in the outfit as he was to the common man. Many had joined ULFA, fought and laid down their lives without ever having met their chief of staff. Even top ULFA leaders did not always know of his movements. For close to two decades, only three photographs of him had been doing the rounds of media houses. The most prominent among them was the one taken at a camp in Bhutan, which shows him attired in a camouflage jacket and sitting cross-legged on a bench with staff officer Robin Neog.

The world at large knew only his voice, either on TV channels during interviews or over the telephone when he spoke to friends and a select few editors. So far, he had given a face-to-face interview only once, to Bertil Lintner, a well-known Swedish journalist based in Thailand, in a South-East Asian capital in 1992. It came close on the heels of a spate of surrenders when ULFA cadres and commanders from several districts in Assam gave up militancy and joined the mainstream. He had also had brief interactions with a few other journalists on the Raising Day event of the organization in Bhutan, when he flew from Dhaka to Paro and thence by road to the camp at Samdrup Jhonkhar.

Baruah had been in Assam, hopping from place to place until the fag end of 1991 and would occasionally go to Bangladesh, Myanmar and other countries. He went off the radar after Operation Rhino was launched in Assam against ULFA in 1991. At the time, there was chaos in the organization; the government offensive was successful in eliminating a large number of middle-rung commanders. The leadership was cut off from the lower cadres, and surrenders were set into motion. Rajkhowa decided to remain for a few years in Myanmar and strengthen the organization. Baruah and his cousin and general secretary, Anup Chetia, slipped into Bangladesh where the pro-Pakistan Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was in power. The rest of the top rung followed suit and their network reached high

political circles. The Indian government gathered details about their activities and hideouts and repeatedly urged the Bangladeshi government to apprehend them. But the pleas were ignored.

The Indian intelligence drew up plans to assassinate Baruah and destabilize the outfit.

The best-planned plot was seemingly hatched by an intelligence plant, who had enrolled in ULFA, risen high in the organization's ranks and then crossed over to Bangladesh for the operation. He hailed from a Hindi-speaking community in Duliajan, and had impressed the leadership by forwarding and implementing the concept of 'Enigma Group', a squad for gathering information and special operations in urban areas. He trained cadres at the camps in Bhutan and had won the confidence of the operations commander, Raju Baruah. On the pretext of accomplishing a task, he descended from the hills in Bhutan and headed straight for the Indo-Bangla border. When he crossed over, he was spotted by an officer of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), who was Baruah's friend, and he was informed. The chief smelt a rat because he had not informed anybody about his plan to go to Bangladesh.

Baruah called Raju to check on his whereabouts. When Raju denied any knowledge of the incident, Baruah was convinced something sinister was afoot. Even as he was speculating, a call from the cadre came on his landline in Dhaka. He said he had just crossed over to Bangladesh and wanted to meet Baruah. The chief was further convinced about the plot when the intelligence-plant cadre offered to give money to the chief to tide over the organization's financial difficulties. Baruah accepted and invited him to Dhaka. However, sensing danger, the cadre turned back and was never seen again in any ULFA camp. He was based in Shillong for a few months, helped the police nab some cadres and then shifted to New Delhi to work for an intelligence agency.

Ever since that plot failed, Baruah was certain that the agencies would double their efforts to get him. He was proved right when a plan to gun him down was put into action. Supposedly, a section of the underworld in Dhaka was given the contract to kill him. The details are fuzzy, but it is known that the agencies and Assam Police went into a tizzy following the chief's disappearance for a few months. Had he finally been eliminated? The underworld operatives claimed they had been successful and even took a hefty payment for the operation. A plan was firmed up by the police to confirm the incident and it was decided to spread the news at Baruah's home

at Jeraigaon in Assam. The ruse worked. A close relative of the chief subsequently boarded a plane for Dhaka, and a sleuth trailed him. That is how it came to light that this attempt too had failed and Baruah was hale and hearty.

Baruah became more cautious than ever. He would not stay at one place for long and frequently shifted locations when he was in Bangladesh. By the late 1990s, he began suspecting that the intelligence agencies had penetrated the top echelons of the outfit. Frictions between Baruah and Chairman Rajkhowa, brewing for a while, took a turn for the worse after the base in Bhutan was demolished in 2003 by the Royal Bhutan Army. Rajkhowa and some of the other senior functionaries did not approve of the chief's efforts to draw closer to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). The meeting of the central executive committee had not been held for years to thrash out all these issues. Within a few months of the pro-India Awami League sweeping to power in late 2008, Baruah quietly slipped out of Bangladesh and landed deep in the jungles of eastern Nagaland to reorganize ULFA.

Our interactions with Baruah were brief for the first few days. We sat with him sometimes when we came down for meals and in the evenings when he watched the evening news on TV. If he missed the news, he asked senior colleague Jibon Moran or us about the news headlines. When there was something controversial or interesting in the bulletin, he would shoot queries at us or solicit our views. We discussed many key issues in Assam, the north-east and India's relations with the neighbours. I wasn't sure if his views were meant to be quoted or were off the record, so I only listened and noted them down.

Every day, he held meetings with the members of the executive council. Long sessions followed, which began in the morning and went on until the evening at different locations around the camp. Sometimes he would be closeted for hours with individual members around the fireplace in his hut. These deliberations were beyond our reach and Baruah would not reveal anything. Sometime later, a senior functionary informed us that the meetings took stock of the prevailing situation in Assam and its neighbourhood and long- and short-term strategies were outlined; the responsibilities of the members were defined and they were exhorted to avoid the mistakes committed by their predecessors in the previous council. Finance was a topic that received attention, he added, and ways and means were discussed to ensure a regular flow. The chief listened to suggestions by the members and

took notes in his diary.

With no mention of the interview, we requested Baruah one afternoon whether we could begin the session soon. His reply stumped us.

'We will go on talking like this. I do not give interviews as such. If my interviews are published, it will make me appear publicity-hungry and as if I consider myself more important than the organization,' he said casually.

I managed to gather my wits and respond: 'But if you don't, bad things could happen. Firstly, we will become the laughing stock of our profession. We will no longer be journalists and you will find us working in a circus. And secondly, you will earn a bad reputation because journalists would have second thoughts about meeting you even if you wanted to.' Pradip seconded my sentiments.

Baruah was silent for some time. It seemed to me that he was simply testing us, for he must have known that we could not return empty-handed. Our trip had been planned several months in advance and it was an opportunity for him and the hardliners to present their arguments, display their strength and perhaps dispel the notion gaining ground in Assam that they were a spent force.

Moran informed us in the evening that the interview would begin two days later in the shed adjacent to our hut and the TV room. Next day, this space was cleaned and decorated with the traditional Assamese gamusa.

The chief's arrival also coincided with a change in the weather. There was a sudden drop in temperature after brief downpours for two consecutive nights. A thick fog enveloped the location until noon. The sun remained obscured for the better part of the day – a matter for worry because we would not have the right light for photographs. However, as there was no option, I had to begin the interview. I planned to divide it into three parts. First, pinpointed questions focused on burning issues – this was expected to be completed in one day. Second, Baruah's version of the outfit's history, how and why it emerged, the different phases and his take on various episodes. And third, the blanks to be filled up after these sessions were over. I would have to sit down again with him for a while before our departure. At night, I readied the recorder and the list of questions for the session the next day.

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At 10 a.m., Baruah, in jungle fatigues, came up to the hillock escorted by four others. I hurriedly clicked a few photographs but, as the light was poor, they

weren't very good.

'I am fully at your disposal now,' he announced and sat on the chair. He agreed to my interview plan, but said he would not always be able to disclose details. 'As you know, the movement is still on and revealing certain facts and details would be detrimental to the movement. So, please don't insist upon topics on which I would not like to share my views.' With this, he placed his Austrian 9 mm pistol on the table.

'No problem. If it is possible, please fill in the gaps off-the-record after these interviews are over. So, here we go. We have many things to cover,' I replied and switched on
the recorder.

'You have met some reporters earlier in different countries, including some from Assam and a few from Bangladesh, if I am not mistaken. But you have given a face-to-face interview so far only to Bertil Lintner. You have developed an image of being media-shy, unlike the rebel leaders of other organizations in the north-east. This is the first time that you have agreed to spend so much time and even stay together with journalists in the same camp. So how does it feel to be with us?' I asked.

'We are delighted and were eagerly looking forward to meeting you. For a long time you've been waiting to visit us, but it was not possible to call you earlier due to the uncertain situation. We are grateful to you both. We appreciate your enthusiasm, the pain you have suffered and the danger you have gone through to travel so far and reach us. Now we have an opportunity to show you the actual state of affairs and tell you the truths that have become untruths over a period because of various reasons,' he answered.

'Yes … we can understand that.'

'You see, many things have to be taken into account before deciding to call journalists to camps. The topmost priority is, of course, your security, which cannot be compromised at any cost. This explains why I had repeatedly told you to keep it a secret because there are people and forces who would prefer not to see my interviews being published or telecast.'

'It's nice to know that you have been looking forward to our visit. However, you have become a sort of a mystery over the years,' I said, and decided on another blithe question before the actual interview. 'There have been countless rumours that you were dead. The most recent was in September just before we set out on our journey when you were supposed to have been injured in shelling by the army during a raid on some camp.

"Paresh Baruah" evokes a ruthless and deadly image. We can't be sure but our close interaction with you over the past few days reveals a different picture.'

'You see, a false image has been intentionally created. That's quite natural for the enemy to do so, and I would have done the same if I were in their position,' he chuckled. 'The objective every time is to create confusion and demoralization in the ranks. In any case, they have not succeeded and this game will go on. Yes, I am deadly in so far as my principles are concerned and I will never deviate from them. It is because of my principles that I have been able to stick to the organization for thirty-two long years. I am addicted in a deadly manner to my principles.'

'But has that not also been the cause of friction between you and the others?' I interjected, and then added as an afterthought, 'No, we will come to that later. First, tell me your feelings when you look back at the movement. Now it is more than three decades since ULFA came into being. It has come a long way and has been through many ups and downs, has it not?'

'Yes. Our experiences have been varied, and we have learnt from our past mistakes. These experiences have made us more optimistic, matured and committed, and they will further help us in realizing our goals. The past cannot be forgotten but some episodes can definitely be prevented from happening again.'

'But there have been mistakes that were no less than Himalayan blunders, if I may say so. ULFA's popularity has taken a severe hit. You must be having some episodes in mind that you wished you could have avoided. What do you think?' I asked.

For a few seconds he was silent, and sipped his green tea before saying, 'The entire process is one of trial and error. No doubt, there have been shortcomings and deficiencies on the way, but they were not intentional. And we have learnt from our failures.'

'But ULFA has been going downhill for the past several years. Do you agree?'

Baruah raised his hands in a characteristic gesture and answered, 'Perhaps, but there has not been a single revolutionary organization in the world that has not made mistakes. Plans and strategies have to be changed as per the circumstances. They always teach you invaluable lessons. The way one views and interprets these lessons depends entirely upon the individual.'

I was expecting a more detailed answer from him about the incidents that

had jolted the outfit. He seemed to deliberately avoid it; perhaps he felt it would reveal fatal flaws in his leadership. Instead, he justified himself by drawing parallels with other outfits. I knew I would just have to be satisfied with that for the moment, and decided to broach the topic again later. It would be quite important to have his take on the events to get a rounded view of certain developments that had left indelible scars on the movement. I moved to my next question. 'This is eastern Nagaland and it is vastly different from Bangladesh and Bhutan where ULFA has had bases. This area is more remote and the terrain is hostile. So are you geographically disadvantaged to carry on with an effective campaign for independence against the Indian government?'

He pondered and pointed out that 'proper planning' and 'foresight' could overcome obstacles. 'In the absence of these even a very secure base would stand imperilled. In Bangladesh and Bhutan we had bases, which were not disclosed earlier for tactical reasons. In Bhutan, we suffered because we dilly-dallied on many things and the situation would have been different had we taken prompt decisions. That did not happen for a variety of reasons. In Bangladesh, we were undermined by people who were unwilling to implement the plans that were chalked out.'

'Well,' I said, 'but a section within the organization who are now overground has squarely put the blame on you. They said you were indecisive in Bhutan even after the operation was launched by the Royal Bhutan Army to demolish the camps. A cadre who was present at the general headquarters when the incident happened and whom I interviewed last year, alleged that senior functionaries were desperately urging you for orders but you were vacillating. Perhaps you had assumed the Bhutan government would never do such a thing as launching an offensive against ULFA.'

'Of course, it is only natural that they will blame me and all those with me who never shook hands with the government. They did not have the courage to stick to the canons of our cause. It is very easy to condemn something from a safe distance.'

'That's understandable. We feel it will not be possible for you to re-establish bases in Bhutan. But what if eastern Nagaland suffers the same fate as Bhutan? Where will ULFA go then? And, as you know, the Indian government has been trying hard for an Operation All Clear kind of offensive to get rid of the base here as well. If our sources of information are to be believed, there have been instances over the past few years when some of

your camps have been raided.'

'The point is,' Baruah explained, 'New Delhi is always up to something and we are well aware of its game plan. That's only natural for the enemy to do. It has been trying really hard for a Bhutan-type operation here. We must stay one step ahead and always be able to gauge the enemy's strategy. It would have to be counterbalanced through measures at the diplomatic level as well. A definite and well-defined strategy would thwart all attempts to dislodge and destroy us.'

'Okay. Then you are quite confident that this base will not suffer the same fate,' I persisted, hoping he would come out with something explosive that would grab the headlines. He seemed to read my mind, and refused to swallow the bait. He responded with a curt, 'We are more alert and mature now.'

There was a break for a while as we munched boiled jungle potatoes with green tea and biscuits served by a young woman cadre. A casual discussion began on food and food habits in guerrilla camps and the periods of scarcity that are often the case in camps. The pattern was usually the same for all underground organizations: rice was the staple diet. In the ULFA camp, non-vegetarian items were served once or twice a week. A guerrilla was expected to eat little, and not to make any fuss or waste even a single morsel.

'Mao Zedong never tolerated wastage of food and we tell the same to our cadres. The plate is expected to be wiped clean at the end of a meal,' the chief said, before digressing as he cited instances from the Long March in China when communist cadres had to go for days without food. He then instructed me to resume the interview.

'You mentioned earlier that you have learnt from past mistakes. Does that mean that ULFA will be able to regain the position of strength that it had in the 1990s?'

He shook his head and replied, 'If you look at ULFA's history, you will see that the organization has been able to tackle all kinds of adversities and has always been able to bounce back after severe reverses. Situations have been different every time and we have been able to cope with them. ULFA cannot be suppressed and the movement will surge ahead with greater strength until the objectives are achieved. But there would definitely be ups and downs like in other movements. We learn from every episode.'

I was expecting this answer and told him so. He looked steadily and silently at me. So I asked, 'The movement will surge ahead with greater

strength, you said … well, would you mind if I told you my observation since I have spoken to a lot of people who had been associated with ULFA —'

'Yes, go on, go on,' Baruah cut me short.

'As a matter of fact, the support for ULFA seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Assam is perhaps no longer there. ULFA had some kind of a Robin Hood image then. People viewed ULFA as a viable alternative to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). It was engaged in social work and worked for uprooting certain evils. The former ULFA leaders, the media and the government have been alleging that the outfit's support base is now restricted to a few communities and districts in Upper Assam. My personal observation is not very different.'

'You are greatly mistaken,' he responded and then fell silent for a few seconds. 'ULFA never had any problems in recruitment. Not less than a thousand boys are willing to join us now. Every day we have been receiving messages from different parts of Assam from people who are desperate to join the organization. Even now, hundreds of cadres are undergoing training at various centres. This is because ULFA has a genuine reason for existence and people feel it is needed all the more now. And, of course, a disinformation campaign about the declining support base of ULFA is part of the Indian government's strategy to destroy the movement, although this is impossible. You have been here for quite some time now and have seen the situation for yourself. Does it tally with the picture given by the government and the intelligence agencies? We expect you to be honest in whatever you write and whatever you have witnessed. Let there be a plebiscite under UN supervision like in Sudan and we are sure there would be an overwhelming response in favour of independence. You know the results in Nagaland when the plebiscite was held in 1951. In some regions of Assam, as a result of the policies by the colonial government, people are frightened to openly say that they support ULFA. Assam is important for India for its rich natural resources, and all kinds of strategies would be adopted to crush movements aiming for independence.'

'Well … okay … but why have there been so many surrenders by ULFA cadres? You must have definitely thought about it … '

Again he shook his head and replied, 'You see, there is no revolutionary organization where cadres and top activists have not surrendered. It's a process that will go on until the ultimate goal is reached. The committed will never stray from the path. As I said earlier, every movement goes through ups

and downs, and so has ULFA and the other revolutionary organizations in this region.'

It seemed to me that he was being evasive on this issue and I decided to probe further. 'I have come across some very interesting episodes from the accounts given by former ULFA functionaries. Some senior people, whom you trusted at one time, joined forces with the police and army and have harmed the organization. What is your opinion about this?'

He paused for a while and said, 'It is true that we have been harmed more by turncoats than by the enemy. The problem was in our selection of leaders. In every revolutionary outfit in the world, there are instances of people changing their path and becoming renegades. We don't blame anybody for this but ourselves.'

'But why this drawback? Why could you not rectify these lacunae at a later stage?'

'Some people craved for importance in terms of seniority and perhaps other factors as well. Yes, there were drawbacks in our selection process. We disciplined the lower cadres but couldn't do so with the top-rung leadership. It is true that many joined emotionally and without much conviction.'

'So, has the recruitment policy then changed over the years?' I asked although I wasn't sure if he would respond. But he did.

'The recruitment policy changes sometimes. We don't take anybody below sixteen years of age. We check their backgrounds. People with criminal backgrounds or rape cases are also not taken. But literacy is not a criterion. We gather details during recruitment and they are divided into political and army wings during the early period. Everybody has to go through mandatory military training. This is essential for discipline in a revolutionary outfit and you will find this in all similar outfits in the world. In the mid-1990s, whatever organizational changes were brought about was mainly to instil greater discipline.'

'So, are you ready with the new team now?'

'We are restructuring and reorganizing everything. As I said earlier, ULFA has emerged stronger than ever, and all those who are with us are committed to the core.'

It was a standard reply, like many of his previous responses, and I changed the topic. 'What do you feel about the existing situations in Assam and India? They have changed a lot over the past two decades, including people's aspirations. Are they conducive for ULFA to achieve greater support and

strength in its campaign?'

'You see the process of Indianization of Assam will continue. Perhaps, at this point in time, India does have greater resources to implement its agenda and this is being facilitated to a great extent by a section of the indigenous people who cannot see beyond minting money and occupying high positions. However, all this is short-lived, and very soon a different situation will emerge. The same set of circumstances was also discernible during the British Raj and during the American War of Independence. There is nothing in the world that cannot be achieved. But one has to remain focused in whatever one does.'

'But then, there have been so many splits in ULFA. People who were associated with the movement are of the view that there was a gulf that could not be bridged between Upper and Lower Assam right from the inception of the organization. The latest came from Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and a few other leaders who have initiated talks with the government. This must have had an adverse impact on the organization. What do you feel?'

Baruah said that he had expected this question from me. 'There is an impression among some sections that ULFA will not be able to recover. Firstly, let me tell you that we don't regard these developments as a division in the outfit— '

'But that is your opinion and your faction's.' I interrupted.

'Ours is different since we regard Rajkhowa's decision to come overground and talk to the government for a solution as a division in the ranks. Interpretations can differ from person to person.' Baruah continued, 'In fact, ULFA has emerged stronger and we have been benefited by the exit of these leaders. Now we know who is actually committed and who is who. The decision to talk to the government has been taken by a section that never had any commitment to the organization's principles. The water has now been separated from the oil. These people were the restraining force in the movement. The burden of feeding them is now entirely on the government. Therefore, there is no loss at all, and the people we have with us now are unwavering in their principles and this has been well understood by the people. Besides, our demand for independence is legitimate. The Treaty of Yandaboo brought Assam into the British Empire and later into the Indian Union. But did any Assamese sign this treaty? No. It was concluded between the British and the Burmese. How could this treaty hand over Assam to India? At no point in time did Assam sign any treaty with India

either. Assam has been annexed by fraud. Even Mahatma Gandhi indicated that Assam could go her own way and Gopinath Bordoloi also spoke along the same lines in one of his resolutions. There was a section who jeopardized everything and brought Assam into India.'

I agreed, harking on how Gopinath Bordoloi, the first chief minister of Assam, had to fight hard to prevent the state and the north-east from falling into East Pakistan according to the plan forwarded by the Cabinet Mission prior to Independence. I also reminded Baruah of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's spat with Bordoloi when the latter opposed accommodating more Bengali refugees in the aftermath of Partition.

He nodded in assent. 'Yes, all this is true but people hardly bother to remember them—'

We were interrupted by Bijoy, who had come to deliver a message. They spoke softly for a few seconds; the chief looked at his watch and whispered again. I knew the interview was over for the day.

'I need to complete some important work tomorrow and will remain occupied the whole day. We will meet again day after tomorrow,' Baruah said as he rose to leave.

'For a change, let us begin with the history of ULFA. I am especially keen to know why and how it all started,' I suggested.

'I have forgotten many things and I don't remember the dates of events.'

'Just whatever you remember … from the very beginning. The origin of the movement is shrouded in controversies. I will gather the dates myself and all I want from you is an objective account of the history, how it began and the various stages,' I replied before switching off the recorder.

At night, I listened to the recorder and found that much of what Baruah had said were a repeat of his earlier arguments. I glanced through the remaining questions and added a few more with a view to extracting something more interesting from him. He was nowhere to be seen the next day. We were told he was chairing a meeting somewhere in the jungles behind the camp. They were discussing serious matters like radio communication and the new codes that were evolved. The intelligence agencies, a senior functionary claimed, were equipped with sophisticated interception devices that had been installed along the border. Even high-frequency communication was unsafe and the only option was to use 'disguised messages'. Codes were generated to be used at different levels. They were frequently changed, especially after functionaries who were engaged in radio communication surrendered. Codes

were also often utilized by ULFA and other rebel groups for misinformation campaigns to confuse the security forces.

In brief sessions over the next two days, Baruah gave out bits and pieces of ULFA's history. The narration was full of details of the early years, interspersed with amusing tales. But it became dreary as we reached the early 1990s. It was clear that he wanted to keep many issues under wraps. He refused to divulge any information post-1992, which was the year when he took shelter in Bangladesh along with other senior functionaries.

When I persisted, he replied, 'Please take it from the people who were involved with us at the time and who have come overground now. I am afraid I cannot say anything more as it could be detrimental for the organization. For me, the organization takes priority over everything else.'

I did not press him further. He also avoided speaking about certain incidents where his involvement was suspected. Nevertheless, I insisted that he ought to set the record right on one episode in the early 1980s when he supposedly shot a businessman in Tinsukia.

'He was overtly anti-Assamese,' Baruah recounted, 'and would even beat up youngsters and children at times. I warned him many a time but he failed to mend his ways. And so, one day, I decided to teach him a lesson. I borrowed a double-barrelled shotgun from a person, which had only one cartridge. I intended to shoot him in the leg. I did not know that the gun would recoil when the trigger was pulled, and the bullet hit him in the chest instead. He was dead.'

'Your name became famous after this incident and is still remembered by many police officers,' I replied.

I reminded Baruah that I would have supplementary questions to our interview. He agreed.

'Let us then catch up after some time as I have to finish off some urgent work that has been pending for quite some time. Keep all your questions ready,' he suggested. It was afternoon when we wound up and he left for a meeting with the senior cadres.

After dinner, I listened to the recording for some time. As in all rebel groups, finance and weapons were the initial barriers. It was a vicious circle: without weapons there would be no financial support as people needed to be forced to donate funds; and without finance, no weapons could be purchased. A few attempts to rob banks and business establishments, which had gained wide publicity during the early 1980s, were successful.

His version of the early phase of the movement was different from what circulated in the media and academia. He categorically denied some episodes that had grabbed newspaper headlines and attributed them to misinformation campaigns by the enemy. One among them was an assassination attempt on him by hired killers in Dhaka at an upmarket hotel where his financial advisor, one Rumi Khan, was supposed to have been shot. And it was assumed that he had had a narrow escape after jumping from the first floor of the building. Another was about a series of blasts at ULFA's hideouts in Bangladesh sometime in mid-2004, which I had also reported at the time in the newspaper for which I worked.

Baruah's eyes gleamed when I asked him about his childhood, and he spoke about school and how he had become addicted to football. He belonged to the Motok community and was born into a lower-middle-class family at Jeraigaon in Dibrugarh. He was the third among six siblings in the family and the most brilliant. His father, who was briefly employed at a neighbouring tea estate, was confident that he would land a plum government job since he had always been good at academics. Up to the sixth standard, Baruah was a rank holder in class, and had always scored 100 per cent in mathematics and earned a scholarship for three consecutive years. However, studies took a back seat after he started playing football for a local club in the district tournament. His goalkeeping skills were recognized and he was soon representing the district junior team. In the midst of all this, he managed to pass the tenth-standard examination in 1974 – his last exam. Although he was admitted to Tinsukia College for the pre-university (classes XI and XII) course, Baruah failed to appear for the final examination. He was selected for the state football team and had to travel continuously to places outside the state for tournaments.

Even as Barauh was playing for the state team, the North East Frontier Railway (NEFR) employed him as a porter and enrolled him in its team. More lucrative offers soon came his way from OIL (Oil India Limited) and ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Commision, as it was known then) had major operations in Assam. He represented the state-owned concerns only in a few matches, though, and soon returned to the railways so he could be close to home. He had already firmed up plans to float a revolutionary organization to campaign for Assam's independence and had gathered a group of like-minded people around him. His cousin, Anup Chetia, who later became the general secretary of the outfit, had begun to hold meetings across the state for

constituting a core team and laying a network. By the end of 1982, Baruah was able to establish contact with the NSCN in Myanmar and was soon able to finalize a team to go to the neighbouring country
for training.

Against my expectations, the chief spoke at length about his family. His wife, Rinku (Bobby) Bhuyan, also a former cadre of ULFA, and their two sons lived in a foreign capital in a neighbouring country. And living with them was another teenager whose parents were shot by unidentified assailants in Assam and who also happened to be the nephew of a senior overground functionary of ULFA. They were all good academically, the chief pointed out, but stopped short of saying whether they would also join the group. Instead, he said that a primary reason behind LTTE's downfall in Sri Lanka was the high position given by supremo Prabhakaran to his son in the organization. Merit became the first casualty of nepotism, and it produced a demoralizing effect.

I realized that Baruah became recalcitrant if he was pressured to disclose too many details. So I began to sit with him whenever the opportunity arose, discussed matters in a casual manner and offered him the scope to speak his mind. As soon as the conversations ended, I would hurry to my room and update my notes. There are things he spoke of that would undoubtedly grab newspaper headlines and add more spice to this book. But these revelations came with the rider that they were 'not to be published'. Every time he said something juicy, he would warn us, 'If you write this, I will issue a press release the very next day saying it is false and your credibility as a journalist will be finished.' Alas! They must go to the grave with me.

Like most rebel leaders, the chief was cagey. He did not want his activities and contacts to become public knowledge, for fear that it would make it easier for his adversaries, including the Indian government, to plot against him and the group. He would not say a word about ULFA's activities in Bangladesh and Pakistan, or its close links with the ISI. Not even off the record. Only once did he casually mention his first visit to Pakistan in 1990.

'We had certain objectives to fulfil, but I did not like the tone and tenor of their [ISI's] arguments,' Baruah recalled one afternoon after dinner. Accompanied by former publicity secretary Sunil Nath, he had gone to Pakistan to firm up training programmes for ULFA cadres, but the ISI came up with unreasonable demands. The chief didn't elaborate on what the spy agency wanted in return, but said that he had decided not to talk to the

officials any more. He walked out of the meeting and left the country two days later. Although the ISI agreed to provide training and logistics, Baruah did not visit Pakistan for some years.

Baruah's long absence from Assam had made him nostalgic. He enquired about his friends in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Guwahati with whom he had been close and narrated how one of his younger brothers, Dinesh, had been tortured and killed in 1993 in what was one of the first instances of 'secret killings' in Assam, allegedly orchestrated by a section of the police and the army. He requested us to give his photograph to his mother who lives in his ancestral village of Jeraigaon. He was especially keen to know about changes taking place in society, and the details that we gave him about the craze for easy money, corruption and the vulgar display of wealth by the nouveau riche astonished him. Although he kept in regular touch with a section of people in Assam over the telephone, I gathered the impression that he was somewhat cut off from reality. I considered the possibility that the people that he relied on for feedback on the situation in Assam were portraying an erroneous picture and deliberately keeping him in the dark for reasons best known to themselves. Or it could be that, for him, keeping the movement afloat and carrying on with the campaign was of utmost importance, irrespective of the aspirations of the masses.

We wove in and out of anecdotes from the days before he went underground. Decades ago, he recounted, he would have been beaten up by Bihari rickshaw pullers in Tinsukia had it not been for some of his friends who rescued him just in time. He had flashed out a revolver without bullets and accidentally pulled the trigger. The Biharis saw the trick and were about to pounce on him when he was whisked away. Another time, also in Tinsukia, he was chased by Bengalis near the railway station after a brawl at a tea shop. After running for a kilometre, he entered a stinking public latrine where he stayed hidden until late at night before sneaking out to safety.

These incidents from his teenage years partly fuelled his urge to put an end to the domination of non-Assamese communities in the state, particularly in business. In Tinsukia, there was an overwhelming presence of Biharis and Bengalis, and the Assamese deeply resented their overbearing attitude. As in other parts of Assam, there were instances of violence between the Assamese and other communities in the 1970s and the '80s, and especially when the agitation (1979–85) against foreign nationals was on. ULFA's attack against Hindi-speaking people years later could be linked to all these

episodes.

Interesting traits about Baruah's personality were beginning to emerge from these sessions. Surrendered cadres who had been close to him were of the opinion that he could always convince and win over people easily. Baruah had a knack for spotting friends at the right places and earning their trust, which was most evident in Bangladesh. There was a dynamism and personal magnetism in him that attracted, but there were also elements that repelled former functionaries. He was supposed to be vindictive, stubborn, even unpredictable at times. On the whole, he was just as simple and jovial as he was complex and lethal.

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The camp we were staying at was unlike others of its sort. It was quiet, and there was no heavy presence of cadres. With the onset of winter, the nights grew longer, an eerie mist setting in over the evenings. The generator stopped humming at 10 p.m. The overcast skies precluded solar cells from being charged, which put an end to our late-night TV watching. There was no option but to sleep and wake early. Sometimes, the silence at night was broken by the sharp barking of deer in the woods nearby. Initially I mistook them for wild dogs. Then somebody said there were herds of deer that came down from the hills to drink water in the creeks. At times, we would hear the frightening trumpeting of elephants in the distance. What if they attacked? There was no wall or barbed wire around the camp. It was common knowledge that bonfires helped keep wild animals at bay, but nothing of the sort was being done here. There was also the ever-present danger of bears and leopards in both the hills and the plains. Despite this, we occasionally left the safety of the indoors at night for a trip to the outdoor urinal.

Our apprehension was misplaced, a senior cadre explained one morning. 'There is a round-the-clock vigil in the camp and there are layers of security. Anything amiss would be immediately noticed and we will swing into action.' He added that the greater danger was from 'enemies' who would like to see the camps wiped out.

'But what would happen in case of a raid? Or what if the camp was encircled by the enemy?' I asked, wondering if they had a contingency plan ready.

'We will take you to safety if such a situation were to arise, so don't worry at all. Do you really feel that a full-scale offensive would be possible here? It would require a huge deployment for a comprehensive attack on the

settlements here. And we are fully equipped,' he replied. He tried hard to convince us that the situation in eastern Nagaland was vastly different from that in Bhutan, which buckled under New Delhi's pressure and initiated action against the rebel bases in 2003.

But this camp was not in the hills, so it would be easier for adversaries to launch offensives, I thought. I always kept a few items and a bag ready near the bed in case the situation warranted quick evacuation. One advantage with the camp's location, though, was that a considerable number of rebel cadres from other outfits could be assembled for defence at short notice. There were easier escape routes including the rivers where motor boats lay moored. The camp stretched deep into the forest to the north and there were bunkers at vantage points on the hillocks that remained camouflaged. Security was inspected every day and, Michael Deka Phukan, who was in charge, was an experienced senior cadre who had been nominated to the new executive committee. Communication was maintained with low-frequency radio sets throughout the camp. Cadres stood guard by rotation and a sentry was posted at night near our shack.

Life in this camp was just as rigorous as in the hill camps, and vigilance was even greater because this was the site all the top leaders frequented when important meetings were held. A whistle woke everybody up at 4 a.m. for the hectic day ahead. Cadres assembled at the parade ground, lined up in three neat columns and marched up and down for a while, and then switched to stretching, freehand exercises and drills. The meal at 7 a.m. was followed by a two-hour break. The inmates were then divided into groups and assigned tasks that included fetching rice, firewood, water and occasionally clearing the jungles.

Always watching these activities attentively was Birina, the four-year-old girl who had been born at the camp. She never got in anybody's way or interrupted the regimented rigmarole of the inmates. Both her parents were ULFA cadres who had served the organization for the past several years. Every evening, she would trot around the camp until her mother found her and took her home. Our hut was on her daily route, as was the TV room, and it was a delight to see her struggling to climb the stairs to reach us. In the beginning, she used to gaze intently at us from a distance, trying to make sense of the new faces and the new activities on the hillock. She was inquisitive when we spoke to her. She wanted to know our names, where we came from and why. And we made it a point to bring her chocolates

whenever we went to the shop.

One day, the early-morning drizzle made the weather colder than usual. Something was different in the kitchen. Kushal was serving his last meal to us – he was to embark on a 'command' to the hills. Kushal, in his late twenties, had grown close to us. Like most of his colleagues, he had been continuously on the move, going either for operations or from one camp to the other. Now he was to go in a small group to a location to the north of our camp, which involved carrying a load of around 15 kg in his backpack and marching continuously for about a week. Chances were that we may never see him again or partake of his culinary delights, especially the boiled pork with rice and the chutney of dried fish with herbs.

I asked when he would come back.

'I don't know, but you will be gone by then. But please do come again,' Kushal replied.

I told him we would as soon as we could.

'As you know, our life is uncertain and we have sacrificed everything for the cause of our motherland. We hope the issues get resolved soon,' Kushal said as he put on his cap and began checking the items in his bag. He carried a small quantity of rice, a polythene sheet to sleep on, a machete, a water bottle, a rectangular saucepan, soap, toothpaste and four magazines for the AK-81 rifle that hung from his shoulder. He said he might soon be sent to Assam to relieve the cadres who had been based there for the past few months. Nobody is stationed at a location or allowed to carry on with the same task for too long. And the assignment was disclosed to the concerned functionaries only a couple of hours prior to their departures.

Kushal took leave of us and waved to his colleagues who had assembled at the parade ground nearby for an address by Bijoy. Ten minutes later, they began the trek that would probably take them to a big ULFA camp. Like Kushal, most of the cadres had joined ULFA several years ago and were trained in eastern Nagaland. I wondered how long their enthusiasm and commitment would last. Surrenders have been quite frequent for ULFA cadres. Nevertheless, their zeal was shared by the new recruits undergoing training at the camp nearby, which we were taken to the next day by two senior functionaries. Our request was accepted under the precondition that we would not give details about its location or any other camp that we might visit before we left for home. Most of the cadres at the training centre were from rural or semi-rural backgrounds in Upper Assam, and many were from

the Moran and Motok communities that mainly inhabit the districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. The training was usually for three months, which included drills, training in arms and making bombs. The rationale of the movement, ULFA's background, sacrifices made by former cadres and the reasons why Assam's independence from the Indian Union was a distinct possibility in the future were all explained to them. Trainees were encouraged to ask questions and clear whatever doubts they had.

I had a chat with one of them, Jiten Saikia, who was in his mid-twenties, and among the 200-odd recruits – including five women – undergoing training. He explained that the toughest activity was the obstacle course, as these required jumping from a height, crawling through tunnels and other tasks, some perilous like trekking in the mountain in pitch darkness. The body, he said, had to be flexible. Eventually everybody manages to adapt and successfully complete the training. Cases of failure were extremely rare. His colleague, a stout young man who identified himself as Montu Neog from Lakhimpur, was keen on the sessions involving small arms. Within a short time, he established himself as a sharp- shooter who never missed a target, whatever the weapon.

Occasionally, trainees were taken deep into the jungle for tips on survival and laying ambushes. Towards the end of the course, they were assigned to one of the departments. This was very often the armed wing. They graduated and were sent to the various ULFA camps in eastern Nagaland. Then they went from camp to camp continuously to be acclimatized to the terrain and the systems in this region. After about a year or so, they would be sent for operations in Assam after being briefed about the targets, the hideouts, the important contacts and the routes.

An operation sometimes took several days to execute. There were clearly defined steps that the cadres followed, whether planting a bomb, tossing a grenade or pulling the trigger. So new groups were either brought in from eastern Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, or those already stationed at hideouts in Assam were activated days in advance so that there was ample time for planning. The preparation began with a recce of the area, choosing the spot and time and identifying the escape route, usually to a neighbouring state, after the task had been completed. On many occasions, as senior functionaries admitted, cadres were apprehended or shot by security forces since they ignored the last step of immediately exiting from the area where the operation had been executed. Operations were sometimes foiled if the

police received prior information either through informers or interception of phone calls.

Some adapted faster in eastern Nagaland and some were compelled to do so. They had no choice, because going back home was not an easy option and fleeing the camp was well-nigh impossible. There were fixed routes and the escapee would have to stop at villages for food. Only the other day, three cadres from another outfit had escaped with weapons. They were tracked down near a village in the hills, brought back with their wrists bound behind their backs and given capital punishment. The ramifications of allowing cadres to escape was obviously huge. They could spill valuable information and details of routes and locations of the camps. There was no mercy for offences like escaping with weapons, spying and rape. There were numerous instances of executions in all the rebel outfits. Punishment could also be as light as running a few laps in the grounds for getting up late from bed or failing to accomplish a small task on time. Someone caught smoking or telling lies, however, would be in for a harsher time – like thirty lashes.

The trainees assumed I was a senior functionary stationed in some foreign country, possibly Bangladesh. I strolled around the camp with a trainer and took a few photographs of the batch marching in the small field. We reached a hillock where target practice was held. The trainer explained that cadres were taught the basics of firearms with dummy rifles for the first two weeks, and then allowed to shoot at targets with the 9 mm pistol and the AK-81 assault rifle. At a later stage came lessons and practice on hurling grenades and making bombs with RDX.

I picked up an empty shell of the Kalashnikov rifle near the trunk of a tree and showed it to the trainer, who had earlier operated out of Bhutan.

'How do you rate this rifle?' I asked.

'One of the best in the world and very accurate,' he said.

'There's something interesting I've observed. The American M-16 rifle is found in abundance with the Manipuri guys but not with ULFA. Why's that?'

'It's all a question of availability and getting it at cheaper rates. M-16s came from Cambodia and Vietnam, and they were preferred because their ammunition is available easily.'

'Okay. What about pistols? What is that one with you?'

The trainer undid his holster, pulled out a sleek 9 mm pistol, and placed it in my hand after removing the magazine. 'This is from Czech Republic. In fact, pistols from all European countries are good but they are becoming very

expensive,' he explained.

We walked to a small pathway that snaked up an adjacent hill and looked tricky. We sat down. Down below was the camp. This centre had been bustling for seven months, ever since a small batch had arrived for training. The settlement was spread over mounds and flat terrain like the other camps. Next to a brook that ran in a north–south direction through the settlement, there were bamboo barracks both big and small, and covered with green and blue tarpaulin sheets. The trainer explained that the instruction module was more or less the same for all organizations. The course had been compiled by incorporating elements from the programmes of groups under whom ULFA cadres had received training earlier, which included the NSCN, KIA and outfits in the AfPak region. Some elements were given greater attention, some aspects deleted and others modified to suit the specific needs.

'What about recruitment? How is it done?' I asked.

A screening of sorts is done before the final selection to check the entry of 'fortune hunters', he replied. 'So, surrenders,' he elaborated, 'would now be minimal because the new batches are more disciplined and committed than the earlier ones.'

'Who does the screening?'

'We have our own people who are engaged in the selection process.'

Classes had ended by the time we returned at 12.30 p.m. It was time for cooking and fun. Smoke billowed from the three kitchens adjacent to each other. Groups were gathering firewood and water and completing other chores, which could extend until after dinner, i.e., between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. Like at all other camps, only two meals were served every day with non-vegetarian dishes of pork, chicken or fish served once or twice a week. Somebody switched on a modern Assamese song on his cellphone. Some discussed a new movie released five months ago. In one corner, a news bulletin on All India Radio, Dibrugarh came on. Come evening, a large crowd gathered in the TV room to catch the evening news. Candles were out by 9 p.m., and then it was time to go to sleep.

We stayed for the night in the training camp and returned to ground zero where we found Baruah waiting for us. The chief revealed that he had arranged a photo session with a group of top functionaries for us the following day. It was only the previous day that Pradip and I had decided to request him for exactly such a session.

We were ready with our cameras before the group's arrival at the camp. We

did not want to shoot until the fog faded. From the hillock, we saw Moran and Bijoy addressing the batch from a podium. A group of twenty-odd cadres sat on the ground and listened, and then it was the chief's turn to speak. We could not hear what was being said, but reckoned that it must be a morale-booster speech. He would also want to brief them about the recent changes. After an hour, we were told to come down with our cameras – the leaders sat on chairs with the cadres behind them for the photos.

We had lunch with the group after that. I wanted to mingle with the boys and understand their views on the movement and their leaders, so I sat down with three of them in a corner outside the kitchen. But they began speaking before I did.

'Sir, we have not met you earlier. Can we know your name please,' asked one who appeared to be in his early twenties.

'I am Captain Nipen Das and I am thrilled to be in your midst. How's life with you?'

'Absolutely fine, and we are beginning to like the place,' replied another cadre.

'You have joined ULFA at a crucial stage when a lot of changes have taken place and a new central committee has just been constituted.'

'Yes, we know that and we are prepared and willing to make sacrifices.'

'So what do you feel about the present leadership?'

They stopped eating and stared at me. 'Come on, don't be so serious. Knowing your views would help greatly and everything will remain with me.' I grinned, hoping to diffuse the sudden tension.

One of them replied, 'Sir (Baruah) is a true solider and revolutionary with a never-say-die attitude. He did not give up like the others did when he could have easily done so, and instead chose to be with us in the jungles here.'

'Yes. What you say is true.'

He continued, 'Everybody respects him and he doesn't believe in a life of opulence. He has made the maximum sacrifice for the organization.'

I ate slowly hoping to sit longer and glean more from them. These cadres in eastern Nagaland kept the flame of insurgency alive in Assam. They had walked hundreds of kilometres from their homes to fight for Assam's 'liberation', which they felt was now nothing but a 'colony' of India like the rest of the north-east, being exploited for its natural resources. For them, ULFA was the answer to Assam's multifaceted problems. And it was under Baruah's leadership that the organization would thrive and inch closer to its

goal. After all, had the chief not shored up the armed wing for a renewed campaign and reconstituted the central committee with more committed people? His diagnosis about the movement and its future vis-à-vis the Indian state made absolute sense to them.

I arrived at the conclusion that it would never be difficult for ULFA to attract a steady flow of recruits, even if the intensity of the war fluctuated. In fact, the number of cadres we saw in these camps flies in the face of repeated assertions made by intelligence agencies that there were no more than 150 people with Baruah. ULFA had several camps in eastern Nagaland, including two big ones where the strength was perhaps more. Among all these agencies, it was only the Research and the Analysis Wing (R&AW) that seemed to have given a slightly higher estimate of cadres owing allegiance to Baruah.[1]

Youngsters were impressed by Baruah's uncompromising posture and lifestyle. There were a spate of reports indicating that he was suffering from various ailments related to the kidney, and sinusitis. But he appeared fighting fit in the camp. His daily routine began at 5 a.m. with exercises for an hour or so. He then surfed the Internet and replied to emails until brunch. He ate twice a day and adhered to the norms of camp life, including abstaining from alcohol. Being a football fanatic, he often kicked the ball around in the morning and tested his goalkeeping skills when the schedule was not hectic. When he was not doing any of these things, he read books on weapons, revolutions and on Mao Zedong and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the two leaders who had influenced him the most.

'From Mao, we learn that patience and sacrifice are the essential ingredients for making a revolution successful,' he once said. 'And the art of diplomacy, from Rahman. See how he made two countries fight with one another and liberated Bangladesh.'

'But do you honestly feel that the same principles and tactics can be applicable to Assam, because the situations are very different?' I asked.

'Situations are different but the ideas would be the same. Everything changes with changing circumstances,' he replied.

Baruah himself had changed over the years. The best indication perhaps came from a game of chess one evening. He lost a game and retired to his chamber. I was surprised since he was neither tired nor supposed to hold a meeting. Chess was his passion and when he lost, he was known to go on playing until he won – his opponent might even deliberately lose for a

respite. Perhaps he had also become less stubborn. Perhaps he now felt that it was futile to display omnipotence all the time.

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Arms and the Rebel

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The next day, I was in for a great surprise. I was again woken up in the dead of night to a rhythmic sound, like marching, a nocturnal parade perhaps. But it was only 1 a.m. Was there an emergency? I stepped out. In the fading moonlight, a group of cadres was walking up the stairs to the huts adjacent to ours; they seemed to be carrying something heavy. As they went in, another group emerged and went down the steps, just as a third bunch came up carrying a similar load. I drew near one of the huts and found Bijoy making an inventory of the items.

'What's the matter? I hope everything is fine.'

He looked at me and laughed. 'Wait,' he replied, went into the hut and brought out a sleek assault rifle that was different from the Kalashnikov and the M-16. 'This is Heckler and Koch.'

Heckler and Koch? Why now, when there was an abundant supply of the Kalashnikov assault rifles? Bijoy didn't know. I picked up a rifle and found it lighter than the others, and with a longer magazine.

'So is this a new consignment for ULFA?' I asked.

'There are pistols as well. I think Sir (Baruah) will himself show you all these in the morning,' Bijoy said as he continued counting the rifles, which were being stacked inside.

The exercise went on for over an hour. After the rifles came boxes of magazines and pistols. I wanted to take out the camera but desisted. The topic could be broached, and a request made for photographs, another time.

Later in the morning, however, I was again shaken out of my slumber by the sound of incessant gunshots. From the hut, I saw cadres shooting with their rifles at a spot outside the camp. Their attire confirmed that they were not ULFA boys. Had they received another consignment too?

Before long, Baruah summoned us downstairs where he was examining a cache of Austrian and Czech Republic 9 mm pistols.

I was certain no photographs would be allowed, but I was wrong. Baruah

asked us to bring our cameras. It then struck me that the arrival of the consignment might have been timed to coincide with our stay at the camp. There were rumours back home that Baruah's faction was running low on guns and ammunition. So, maybe, a different image needed to be portrayed. As I began taking pictures, the guns boomed again from outside the camp. I enquired if I would be able to take a look. Yes, but without the camera.

A small squad of ten cadres belonging to NSCN(K) was trying out the new weapons, the same as the one Bijoy had shown me earlier. Three of them loaded the rifles, fired a few rounds and then passed them on to be cleaned and packed in wooden boxes. Drawing near, I recognized two cadres, including a senior officer to whom I had been introduced some days ago.

We shook hands, and they asked us if we wanted to test the new weapons.

I wanted to, but should I? Is it ethically correct for a journalist to do that? Would it not suggest that I was abetting these activities? However, the motive is what actually matters and mine was not to encourage them, I reasoned. I am deeply interested in all kinds of small arms. Moreover, no law would be violated in this part of the world if I said yes.

I picked up one of the rifles and pulled the trigger with the barrel aimed at the sky. Three shots fired in quick succession. I squeezed the trigger again for another round. I examined the rifle minutely afterwards: they were second-hand but in good condition, with scratches here and there, perhaps to eliminate traces of their place of production. The officer said it was an HK-33 and had been manufactured in some South-East Asian country.

'But why Heckler and Koch now?' I asked.

'Simply because it's a good deal that we have got,' he replied, adding, 'The primary reason for selecting HK-33 was the economics involved in the scheme. It is cheaper than the AK-81, and its ammunition is low-priced as well, the same as the American M-16 and the Indian INSAS, and they are easily available. And we might be able to get more of this variety in the future.'

The officer revealed that the consignment would have reached the camp much earlier had it not been seized due to non-payment of dues. But by whom? He did not say. Obviously, many parties were involved, and there were commissions to be paid. Yet another functionary said that the weapons had been routed through China's Yunnan Province. Interesting. I wanted to probe further for information about the routes and hubs, but stopped as Bijoy approached. There were many questions to be asked, but there would be no

answers.

Later that evening, I casually brought up the case of the consignment with Baruah. I wanted to know the source and whether Yunnan had a role to play in the delivery of this consignment.

He laughed, and replied, 'It is not that simple. The Chinese are actually the smartest of the lot.'

He would say no more and I was even more confused. There was hardly any doubt that European brands at cheap rates would add a new angle to the proliferation of small arms in the region. And China could face stiff competition in retaining the top position in this illicit trade.

China's south-western Yunnan Province became a hub for weapons in the mid-1990s.[1] Easy and quick availability of Chinese guns and grenades had been a potent factor in sustaining insurgency in Myanmar and India's north-east. Gone were the days when Naga and Mizo guerrillas marched thousands of kilometres to China for a few rifles and small quantities of ammunition that were exhausted after a few operations. Orders could now be placed from any location without the need for a face-to-face interaction. The buyer could procure large quantities, choose from a wide range of items, and could sometimes even get the consignments delivered to a location of choice.

The sensational arms haul in Bangladesh's Chittagong on 2 April 2004 is clear evidence of the numbers available for sale in China. The consignment, which was purchased at an estimated US $4.5–7 million, included assault rifles, sub-machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, grenades, magazines, walkie-talkies and much more, mostly of Chinese origin. Only a small percentage was sourced from other countries. The consignment was shipped from Hong Kong to Sittwe on Myanmar's Arakan Coast and then to Chittagong in fishing trawlers.[2] Sources in ULFA claimed that two-thirds of the consignment was meant for them and the rest for the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak–Muivali) (NSCN-IM).

But why was China selling weapons to rebels? Officials of the Indian government were of the view that these were either surreptitiously diverted from Chinese ordnance factories under the state-owned Norinco and then sold or auctioned off after a few years of use by the army – in the same manner in which other items are disposed of. They said that weapons at cheap prices were sold not only to rebel outfits but to anybody who wished to purchase them. This view concurred with the observations of militants and gunrunners who have spoken anonymously over the past few years. A senior

cadre with a Kuki militant group in Manipur went so far as to claim that retired officers of the People's Liberation Army in China were the middlemen in the trade with agents stationed in Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong.

The lawlessness in the frontier regions of China also lent itself favourably to activities like gunrunning and drug trafficking. Describing the state of affairs in Yunnan in 1995, a leading Asian magazine said: 'Last year seizures of illegal arms were up nearly 30% over 1993. That reflected both increasing availability of guns and rising official alarm. In September [1995], a month-long crackdown netted some 120,000 illegal weapons. And, while military handguns are the hottest item, gunrunning syndicates are marketing grenades and sub-machine guns. In May [1995], Guangdong police seized anti-tank rocket launchers.' It went on to explain how firearms that were once sold to Vietnamese and Burmese communists by Beijing were finding their way back to Yunnan and landing in the hands of organized crime syndicates.[3]

The origin of the phenomenon can be traced to the policy of President Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's vibrant economy today, who had directed the armed forces to generate their own resources. The PLA had reportedly run nightclubs for self-sustenance.[4] Over a period of time, Norinco began selling arms to buyers from different countries, and that led to the wide availability of Chinese firearms in troubled spots across Central and South Asia. The Taliban were using them, and the People's Liberation Army of Nepal also had access. Then, in the late 1990s, mafia groups (like Blackhouse) reportedly emerged in Yunnan and began supplying firearms from ordnance factories to rebels in India's north-east.[5] Rebel cadres explained that these firearms were cheaper than those from Thailand or Cambodia and the deals were 'reliable'.

Decades ago, ships laden with arms reached Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh from Thailand and the weapons were then brought in through Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. The focus on Myanmar came after a series of incidents in the late 1990s, including Operation Golden Bird in Mizoram in 1995, which was a joint initiative by the Indian and Myanmarese armies to prevent the shipment of a consignment of arms by ULFA, ATTF and PLA. In addition, the crackdown on militants by the Awami League government in Bangladesh after it assumed power in 2008 had also made the routes in

Myanmar hyperactive. In Myanmar, some of these routes passed through zones controlled by militant outfits who had come overground after ceasefire agreements with the government.[6] Just as in Manipur and Assam, these rebel groups would either choose to impose a tax or keep a part of the consignment for themselves.[7] The lure of easy money had also drawn a section of Myanmarese army officials into gunrunning and similar activities.[8]

The consignments entering India's north-east use routes that pass through national highways, villages, hilly terrains and towns. The trade is sustained by a delicate understanding between militant groups, agents and sometimes government officials. The heavy deployment of security forces along the Moreh-Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur highway has now made the other road – the one that originated at Champhai in Mizoram and passed through Silchar and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam to Dimapur – more active. Agents stationed at selected places in the region would place the order either at Moreh or at Dimapur, the hottest spots for purchase of arms in the north-east.[9]

The prices went up as the consignments travelled deeper into the north-east. Agents, who moved the consignment hundreds of kilometres through unfriendly routes to avoid detection, asked for commissions. An AK-47 assault rifle that cost around Rs 3.5 lakh in Moreh–Tamu area along the Manipur–Myanmar border could go up to around Rs 4 lakh, sometimes even higher, by the time it reached Dima Hasao in Assam. Of all the items, the rates at which the 9 mm pistols were sold fluctuated the most; an original Chinese product was as expensive as Rs 2 lakh, and it could cost as little as Rs 30,000 for assembled pieces, which were sometimes sold in pockets in the border states.[10]

The illicit trade is highly organized and has burgeoned despite the Indian government's efforts to curb it. China refuses to accept that its weapons were falling into the hands of insurgent outfits in much the same way as the Myanmar government turns a blind eye to such activities in its frontier regions. Besides, no international control system governed small arms and grenades. All that the UN had been able to achieve so far is a set of three international instruments: (a) Programme of Action that was adopted in July 2001; (b) the legally-binding Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, which came into force on 3 July 2005; and (c) the International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit

Small Arms and Light Weapons, adopted by the General Assembly in December 2005. These protocols were limited in scope and content and they set standards only for national systems concerned with firearms manufacture, marking and transfer.

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Baruah appeared more confident after the arrival of the new weapons. He suggested that the interview ought to be finished at the earliest, as he would be completely occupied after a few days. So, as agreed upon, he reached our hut the next day for the final session. [It was a sunny morning and I got some lovely photographs.]

Before he sat down, I asked him if he would take a photograph with us standing up. 'No problem,' he said. He knew why I had asked him: 'Because you must have the evidence of meeting us and staying at our camp, right?'

When the interview began, I started with the the split in the organization. 'We were discussing Chairman Rajkhowa's decision to go overground to seek solutions to the conflict. You denied it was a split and you are of the view that ULFA will only emerge stronger after the exit of these leaders. So you stick to your earlier precondition of sovereignty as the core issue of discussion with the government. But there are glaring examples in front of us like the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the Maoists in Nepal, the Taliban in Afghanistan or even the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland either being destroyed or being pushed on to the back foot. The state is supreme.'

He shook his head, an unusual gesture for him, and replied that these movements were all unique and the products of the peculiar circumstances prevailing in the respective regions. 'Likewise, ULFA has its own characteristics even though there may be some similarities. You see, Taliban has religious objectives and the Maoists propagate class struggle. They are not demanding independence. However, there may be elements in their movements that can be borrowed later on. After independence, we will assess if the Maoist ideology can be adopted in Assam. We have common enemies with the Maoists, although we are ideologically different. On the other hand, we have forged unity with the Naga and Manipuri revolutionary organizations in this region that have the same objectives and outlook. We want a peaceful resolution without conflict and through discussions.'

'Okay, we know ULFA has close ties with many groups in the region like NSCN(K), UNLF and even PLA. What about organizations elsewhere in the north-east and South Asia? What kind of relationship do you have with

them?'

'Our stand is very clear as I've said before,' said Baruah, pausing to drink his green tea. 'If organizations have a common enemy, there is no harm in forging unity. India is our enemy and we want India weakened. You would have also done the same if you were in my shoes. ULFA will benefit if the Maoists are able to carry out an effective campaign against India. We have a tactical understanding with the Maoists in so far as the common enemy is concerned. And the same applies to all revolutionary organizations in this region and South Asia. Our cooperation with like-minded groups in the north-east has been strengthened.'

'Tactical understanding with Maoists … that sounds interesting. What do you mean by that?'

'The Indian colonial government is viewed as an enemy by the Maoists. As our enemy also happens to be the same, there's an understanding with them. Our relationship with them is not new. Several top Maoist leaders attended ULFA's Raising Day celebrations in Bhutan. Subsequently, there have been meetings with them and we have given logistical and moral support to them. The understanding that has been forged will continue into the future as well. The same applies to the other revolutionary groups of the north-east based in eastern Nagaland, and we are closer to them because we share the same objectives.'

I had expected something more about ULFA's ties with the Maoists. What he said confirmed the revelation by former ULFA cadres in interviews with me some months ago in Assam.

Once, Kishenji, the chief military strategist of Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CP-Maoist) who was shot dead in Bengal, had got in touch with Baruah to firm up a deal for weapons. It was clinched and a small consignment was delivered after a few months. But the Maoists' interest in getting involved with affairs in Assam had upset ULFA. I wanted Baruah to give me something of interest on that. 'Don't you think ULFA would be in trouble if the CPI (Maoist) is able to strike deep roots in Assam? There already are reports to this effect.'

'I don't agree and you are wrong in your assessment.'

'No … but don't you think that the CPI (Maoist) always works on a well-laid-out and long-term strategy, and have well-read and dedicated people in their ranks?' I asked.

'That the Maoists are trying to expand in Assam at the cost of ULFA is a

disinformation campaign by the colonial government to confuse the people. Yes, we don't rule out the possibility of a section getting attracted towards Maoism, but it will never be a destabilizing factor for us. ULFA has sacrificed more than 13,000 people and it cannot be eliminated easily. We know the people who have been trying to embrace and spread Maoism in Assam very well, and many among them are already on the back foot. We have a definite strategy and we do not think Maoism will be able to strike deep roots in Assam. ULFA will always be able to stand head and shoulders above everybody else in Assam.'

Many of them were on the back foot. That underscored his disapproval of the Maoists's efforts quite clearly. It was only natural. But, if he was unhappy, why had he come to a 'tactical understanding' with them? He wasn't likely to say any more on the subject.

'Okay, let's discuss General Secretary Anup Chetia now. He has been in prison in Dhaka for more than a decade now. Do you think he would support the peace process initiated by Chairman Rajkhowa?'

The chief smiled as I finished the question. 'Many men, many minds. It is difficult to give a precise answer to your question. But so far his stance towards the revolution has been commendable and highly appreciative. He has his views and we cannot say how he will react after his release from jail.'

I had expected a different answer because Chetia was Baruah's first cousin and close friend. The jailed leader had so far been reluctant to be brought to India where he will surely face prosecution. Nevertheless, what the chief said clearly betrayed his doubts about Chetia, who had been arrested in Bangladesh for possession of a satellite phone and foreign currency among other prohibited items.

My next question: 'Two issues have been grabbing newspaper headlines at regular intervals. One is about the huge investments made by ULFA in Bangladesh and your involvement in the arms trade. What's your take on these issues?'

Baruah was silent for a while and munched on the boiled potatoes that had been brought out for us. When he spoke though, he barely stopped for breath. 'If the Indian colonial government is so sure about the investments in Bangladesh, why have they not been seized?' he asked. 'The party in power in Dhaka now (Awami League) is quite cordial with New Delhi, and the Indian government can easily verify the facts about Arabinda Rai whose

name has cropped up recently as the person who has helped ULFA make those investments. The Indian government should refrain from such tactics because they do not yield results. The media should question the government on these issues and abstain from circulating false rumours. All this is absolute trash.

'In so far as acquisition of weapons is concerned, it is only natural for a revolutionary organization to acquire them because you cannot fight with dummy rifles. Even during the freedom movement in India, there were several instances of arms consignments being confiscated by the British. Subhash (Chandra) Bose and other revolutionaries were involved in such endeavours. As ULFA's chief of staff, I have the responsibility of providing weapons to cadres for self-defence. Therefore, we have explored various sources for weapons. We have been successful in some and we have failed at times. This is not a crime and this has been going on since time immemorial in all countries that have witnessed revolutionary movements. The effort to obtain weapons is an ongoing process.'

'Can you tell us something more about these sources? And the arms haul in Chittagong in 2004?'

'You see, the movement is still on and we can't reveal anything that will harm the interests of the organization,' Baruah replied. He then indicated with a gesture of his hands that he would not like to be asked more on the topic.

'Don't you think air power would be necessary to make even a minimum dent on the Indian armed forces?' I asked, moving to my next question.

'Yes, of course. We will have it.'

'But how?'

'We will outsource air operations to some agencies.'

I was a bit startled. 'But are you sure you will get such an agency that can operate in this region? It looks difficult to me.'

'Yes, we will.'

'What is ULFA's road map for a sovereign and independent Assam? What kind of economic and political models will
you adopt?'

'It is difficult to explain such a vast topic in a brief span of time,' he replied after a moment's deliberation. 'Our Constitution mentions scientific socialism that is already in vogue in many countries, including in Europe and other socialist countries. A model that will take Assam forward and bridge

the gap between the rich and the poor will be adopted. As far as international relations are concerned, we will have relations with countries that are likely to be beneficial for us. No country in the world can afford to remain isolated.'

'That means you have kept your options open. But you know people want to know more about other issues. Now the time has come when you can't do anything against the people's wishes. You can see the upheavals in the Muslim countries. ULFA has been involved in random bombings, especially after 2003, and innocent people have lost their lives. As a result, indigenous communities have withdrawn support to the organization. Don't you think there is something wrong in this?' [I cited the examples of Dhemaji, where schoolchildren were blown apart on Independence Day in 2005, and the numerous bombings in Guwahati.]

Baruah declared that there would be no more bombings in Assam or any other place where indigenous communities were based. 'We do admit that ULFA has blundered earlier on a couple of occasions. These have happened mainly as a result of the lack of foresight and planning by commanders. We would like to say here that bombs have been triggered to kill civilians by Indian intelligence agencies as well so that the blame goes to ULFA. Such incidents happen as a reaction to operations carried out by ULFA against security forces or against assets like pipelines carrying crude oil. There were commanders earlier who have acted against the interests of the organization. We feel extremely resentful for actions that have resulted in death and injury to innocent people. Our best efforts would be to prevent such incidents in future.'

'Who do you think carried out the secret killings, including the assassination of Parag Das?'

'You know who has done it and it's not a secret. The government orchestrated these killings in a manner that no traces of evidence were left. Those who know are afraid to speak out. And the same happened with Parag Das, although, in his case, one IPS official was directly involved in the planning and execution.' Baruah went on to mention the episode on 12 August 1998, when four relatives of ULFA's publicity secretary, Mithinga Daimary, were gunned down at Nalbari by unidentified people.

I pointed out that it was difficult to quantify the number of people who had fallen prey to secret killers. 'The idea seems to have been borrowed from Punjab where the number of people killed under similar circumstances was

much higher. When I was in Delhi, I remember hearing about a senior superintendent of police in Punjab who committed suicide after he was implicated in these killings. But ULFA has been involved in the killing of Hindi-speaking communities, especially Biharis, hasn't it?'

'We have earlier said that ULFA's movement is for all people residing in Assam. However, we have seen that some communities living in Assam for a long time have colluded with colonial forces against the Assamese and they have never raised their voices against exploitation. There have been many instances when these people have committed atrocities on the indigenous people. There are examples from Tinsukia and near my village where the Biharis, Marwaris and Bengalis mistreated the Assamese. Naturally, the divide has grown because there has been a severe reaction from the indigenous communities.'

'Then what role would you envisage for them and other non-Assamese groups in a sovereign Assam?'

'If these groups become Assamized and if they identify themselves with the interests of the Assamese, there would not be any problem. In the future, in an independent Assam, the conflict will not subside if they persist with the same ethos.'

'It is true that indigenous communities have been marginalized. However, I think the fault lies with the indigenous communities themselves,' I argued. 'It is said that the people get the government and leaders they deserve. Let me tell you honestly what the intelligentsia feels. It is of the view that the Biharis have been killed so that the vacuum could be filled by Bangladeshi migrants.'

'This problem has been created by our forefathers, intellectuals and politicians. This question should be posed to the Indian colonial government, not us.'

Baruah seemed to want to end the discussion, but I soldiered on.

'But the situation is fast spinning out of control. As you know, a sizeable section of the indigenous communities feel that their identity is at stake in the face of the demographic onslaught from Bangladesh. The Assam Accord has become a joke. The government has not bothered about preventive measures. How do you plan to tackle this menace?'

'This problem has been created in Assam to serve Indian political interests. Even before, it was the British who facilitated illegal immigration to Assam. Therefore, the solution will have to be given by the Indian government. ULFA is not in a position to resolve the issue because it has no

political power. We will work on a definite strategy after independence, which we would not like to disclose now. There will have to be a comprehensive plan to come to grips with illegal immigration. Of course, if you initiate positive policies, the outcome will be positive and vice versa. This problem was not created by ULFA and so the question should not be posed to us. ULFA is only demanding independence, which is a legitimate right.'

It was an expected answer. After all, ULFA had vested interests in Bangladesh, and Baruah's take was only a reiteration of established views on the issue.

I tried to present a hypothetical scenario for the future: what if, a hundred years or so down the line, the indigenous communities in Assam became minorities like the tribals of Tripura or the Bhutia–Lepchas of Sikkim? The natural resources would also surely get depleted, if not exhausted. 'What will happen then if ULFA still fails to secure Assam's independence?'

Baruah asserted that it was not possible to wipe out a race and there was no such example anywhere in the world. He cited the examples of the Jews and the American Indians, the atrocities committed on them and efforts made to obliterate their existence. 'Similarly, the Assamese race cannot be obliterated. It is true that Assam's resources would be extracted but it will not be possible to completely exhaust the reservoir. If the current exploitation can be stopped, our future generations would be secure. The need of the hour is to forge unity among the different sections of society and speak in one voice against the colonial policies. It is not ULFA's responsibility alone to resolve these burning issues. The lead should be taken by civil society organizations in checking the exploitation.'

'The situation is Assam cannot be compared to what happened with the Jews or the North American Indians, and I'm sorry but I can't agree with what you have said,' I said. The circumstances were different and there were no refugees and land-hungry peasants from Bangladesh either in the US or the Middle East. I knew he wouldn't say anything more on illegal immigration. I shifted to the next question on the role of civil society organizations in ULFA's strategy. These were groups that were closely associated with the rebel outfit and were utilized to further the rebel outfit's agenda. Earlier, ULFA had supported the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity (MASS), which exposed human rights violations by the police and army and often triggered agitations against them. 'MASS has lost its sting, but you now speak

favourably about Akhil Gogoi and his Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity. Will you continue to support such organizations?'

Baruah nodded, and then explained the importance of mass-based organizations in ULFA's campaign, but also indicated that he would not disclose the plan on how they would be utilized. According to him, the outfit's overground activities became much easier with support from such groups but admitted that there was a dearth of dedicated leaders there. He added that the commitment of a mass-based leader ought to be much more than that of a guerrilla warrior, away in the jungles, because he is very much in the forefront, highly visible and his example would be seen and emulated by others.

I glanced at my diary with satisfaction – only a few questions remained to be asked, and answered.

The next question was on Sanjoy Ghosh, the social activist who was supposedly killed by ULFA in 1996. I wanted to know why he was eliminated, though I felt Baruah would wash his hands off an episode that had shown ULFA in a bad light.

He was true to form, replying that the act had been carried out by lower-level cadres, who had no authorization to do what they did. 'In fact there was no instruction to kill him, and we suffered heavily, believe me. We were in Europe at the time when the news was flashed that he was no more. We were about to attend a meeting with diplomats from as many as twenty countries, as they had expressed a desire to know about our movement and objectives. The next step would have been very important in our campaign for independence. But the programme had to be cancelled and we dived for cover. Sanjoy's aunt, Arundhati Ghosh, was an Indian diplomat and she did not leave any stone unturned to defame us. Soon we had to leave for safer destinations.'

It was a pointless line of enquiry. Instead, I asked him for his views on the many militant outfits in Assam – among different tribes such as the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas – that had entered into dialogue with the government after a few years of armed struggle.

'Yes, many groups have sprung up,' he responded quickly. 'These movements have resulted from the decades-old grievances that have been fuelled by the government. Many of them have now realized the importance of unity and cooperation–'

'But they have complained against Assamese chauvinism, which does

exist,' I interrupted. 'Don't you agree?'

He agreed and briefly spoke about how the tribal groups have been alienated from the Assamese mainstream. 'Besides chauvinism, I feel religious fundamentalism is also to blame. Some like the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) have seen that it is difficult to achieve much if the war is fought alone, and it has been the same case with others as well. Whatever these groups have secured is not sufficient, which they will realize very soon. Perhaps some will be satisfied temporarily, but the frustration will start all over again among future generations. They will then join us in realizing the larger goals.'

'You mentioned religious fundamentalism, but that is an exception and not the rule in Assamese society. Furthermore, it is a recent phenomenon. In any case, you are optimistic about their support as well. ULFA will have to be accepted by them, which means that the loopholes in the organization must be plugged. There is an allegation that ULFA is an absolutely military organization with no role for the political wing. Many sections, who feel that the party must dictate the gun and not vice versa, dislike this.'

'There I don't agree,' Baruah said. 'I'll tell you my opinion, but finish your tea first. It's getting cold.'

Pradip, who had been busy interacting with the other senior cadres, sat down with us, and after a five-minute break for tea, we resumed the discussion.

I reminded him about the changes in the organization that were made with the objective to strangle the political wing. I told Baruah that this was an opinion shared by some scholars who had studied ULFA minutely, and cited the name of a book. 'For instance, the changes in early 1996 not only created confusion within the ranks but sounded the death knell of the political wing. And, even in the newly constituted central committee, most of the members are from the army. No well-known revolutionary movement in the world has given so much emphasis to the military aspect, except probably the Kachin under whom ULFA cadres had received training. It seems that ULFA was heavily influenced by the Kachin Independence Army.'

Baruah contradicted me. 'No, it's not true. The army has interfered only when the political wing has wavered in its commitment.' He felt that all members in a revolutionary organization, irrespective of the department in which they were enrolled, must be acquainted with the military culture and about the aims and objectives of the movement. He said that friction between

the different branches occurred only when the leaders were ignorant about the issues. The armed wing only carried out their leaders' orders, he stressed.

'Our observation is different although you may not agree with us. The predominance of the army could also mean that you would support a military dictatorship in the future and it could be similar to the tyrannical regimes seen in Africa,' I argued.

'You see, when a leader lacks commitment and asks others to follow certain principles and policies, it becomes difficult for a soldier to obey. If a leader emphasizes on compromise or change in the organization's objectives, we will never obey such orders. Nobody has joined ULFA seeing the leaders, but because of its aims and objectives, which are clearly enshrined in the Constitution. Division is bound to occur if the leadership falters on vital issues. There is no question at all of domination by the army over the political wing. The chairman will have to relinquish his position if he advocates peace with New Delhi before the core issue of sovereignty is resolved.'

I had almost exhausted my questions. 'Have you set a time frame for achieving the objectives? The Indian government has repeatedly said it will not talk about sovereignty. Have you firmed up an alternative strategy?'

He answered that strategies would be framed depending on the domestic and international scenarios, and the objectives could be attained only when the overall situation became favourable.

'So it is quite uncertain. But how long do you think it might take?'

Baruah was not expecting independence any time soon. 'Some may say that independence would be delayed, but it would be wrong to say that it is an unattainable goal. We will be fully prepared for all kinds of eventualities. Many revolutions have taken an unusually long time to reach their goals. We are making strong efforts to convince the international community about the genuineness of our movement and we are confident of a positive outcome.'

'And you will continue to be in the vanguard of this movement. Like your game of chess, you will have to now make careful moves. A red corner notice has been issued against you, and the Indian government is leaving no stone unturned to apprehend you. How have you managed to escape arrest so far?'

That elicited a smile. 'This is not something I am greatly proud of. I will

have to die one day even if the Indian government fails to apprehend me. But I will stand by my principles in whatever situation I find myself in, even if I have to lay down my life.'

'But there might have been instances when you narrowly escaped being apprehended?' This was not from me, but Pradip, who was listening to the conversation.

Baruah laughed before replying. 'Yes, there have been some, and only my presence of mind saved the day for me,' he replied, and proceeded to give graphic accounts of two close shaves that he had had many years ago during the early days of the movement. The first was in Amguri in 1988 after he had returned from Kachin. He was travelling on a motorbike with a friend when they were stopped by the police at a barricade and taken to a police station. At the station, Baruah saw his photo on the wall in a corner and his heart skipped a beat. Boldly, both men flashed their Oil India Limited identity cards and claimed to be low-ranking officials. They were let off after being interrogated for half an hour by a sub-inspector.

In Shillong, on another occasion, the police picked him up from the road when he had reached the city for a meeting with senior cadres. The army had just launched the counter-offensive against ULFA in late 1990, and the intelligence had alerted the Meghalaya Police about the presence of militants from Assam. Baruah was taken to a house and cross-examined and he was able to convince them that he was a businessman from Guwahati who was in Meghalaya to strike a deal. He was set free and he crossed the border to Bangladesh the next day.

'When was the last time you were in India?'

'Oh, I keep going to Manipur and Changlang (Arunachal Pradesh).'

We burst into laughter. 'Then you might as well have met us in India,' I offered.

'No, then it would not have been possible for me to have spent so much time with you, and all the suspense would have been be missing. And what's more, now you get to write so much more,' Baruah replied.

That's true. And we wouldn't have seen the beautiful landscapes in eastern Nagaland. We saw and learnt so many new things. 'But do inform us whenever you plan to come to the north-east again,' I said.

'Yes, this place is beautiful and the situation here is the same as our north-east, where people have been fighting against the colonial policies of the Indian government.'

‘But after this interview is published, there will be an alert sent to Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh governments about your visits. You had better be careful,’ I said.

He laughed as he got up to leave. ‘And in case I am caught, I am pretty sure I will not live to see another day. The government is afraid of ULFA and it is the sole obstacle to their turning Assam into an unmitigated colony.’

I reminded him that his intuition to sense danger was legendary, and that he would always be able to scrape through to safety. And he was also supposed to be a great judge of character.

Baruah thought for a while before replying. ‘I am very careful with what I say to people. It is essential to study a person before you start interacting with him and this is something I learnt from my football days because you must assess the opponent’s team before the match begins and firm up the strategy accordingly. But it is also necessary to be optimistic. I never thought I would occupy this position today or that I would be vested with so much of responsibility.’

‘Now that you have, do you feel that you are playing the role of General Lachit Barphukan, who defeated the mighty Mughals?’

‘The men are different and the situations are different. The role played by Bir Lachit is incomparable.’

We had run out of time. ‘When would we meet again?’ I asked him.

Baruah put his pistol in its holster and looked at us solemnly as he replied, ‘It all depends upon you. If you are willing and if we feel that security will be foolproof, we will invite you again. But always do your exercises to remain fit – you know the amount of energy required in these hills. Just make it a point to run a minimum distance every day, either in the morning or in the evening.’

Advice aside, Baruah had left some great news for the last. He informed us that he had received a message that NSCN(K) chairman, S.S. Khaplang, was keen to meet us for an interview. Baruah asked us to be prepared.

I was ecstatic. Interacting with the Naga chief would be a great bonus for all the hard work that we had put in to reach this base.

But a last question about ULFA. ‘Who is the new acting chairman?’ I asked Baruah. ‘It seems there is a lot of speculation about him in Assam.’

‘He was supposed to come here too. It was cancelled at the last minute. He is a learned man, well versed in international affairs, and absolutely dedicated to the organization’s goals,’ the chief said with a sigh of

satisfaction.

'I have three persons in mind who could be this mysterious "Dr Barman", but I also know you will not reveal his true identity,' I said with a smile. 'Will it be possible to send a few questions to him?' I proposed. 'I can give you a few and, if possible, you can email him the questions. It would be great if he could send me his answers before I reach home.'

He agreed and then walked off.

Moran later informed us that after the interview with Khaplang, we would be taken to the camps of NDFB, UPPK and some others if possible. A week full of action! In addition, there could be an important event on 30 December, he added, which would give us an exclusive story.

I wanted details.

'You will come to know soon and I am sure you will enjoy it,' Moran said before leaving us.

The first task had been accomplished. And now, the next.

The story of eastern Nagaland was incomplete without Khaplang, whom I would meet soon. At night, I mused over the session today, what Baruah said, and viewed his statements in the context of the current situation in Assam. I thought of the bigger rebel groups in the north-east, like the PLA, UNLF and NSCN(IM) and their journey so far, and compared them to ULFA. The differences were glaring. ULFA's support base had undoubtedly dwindled, as had its activities, if not the striking capacity. It had survived, but survival had taken precedence over everything else. Some core issues were discarded and that set into motion the process of its alienation from the mainstream. This was acknowledged by a majority of the surrendered and the underground rebels with whom I had interacted in the past several years. Nevertheless, Baruah was of the firm opinion that good times were around the corner, and ULFA would soon regain a position of eminence.

But it was important to understand what led to the downhill journey.

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ULFA's emergence and spread in the early 1980s was the culmination of long-standing grievances and a feeling of alienation engendered by the government's lack of understanding of the region and its erroneous policies. Even as it was taking baby steps, the historic Assam agitation (1979–85) against illegal immigrants had engulfed Assam. The radical elements in the movement, mostly from the Asom Jatiyatabadi Juba Chhatra Parishad (AJYCP) and some of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), became

sympathizers and active members of the outfit. They subscribed to the view that only violence would attract New Delhi's attention for redressal of the perceived injustice since Independence. Hence, ULFA was the panacea to all the ills. Its tentacles spread far and wide in a brief span and cadres began to be enrolled in large numbers.

ULFA derived other benefits from the agitation. The Assam Accord (1985), which brought an end to the six-year movement, left a sizeable section disgruntled and they plunged headlong into the rebel outfit. The AGP, comprising members from the AASU and other organizations that had spearheaded the agitation, swept to power in the subsequent assembly polls on the anti-foreigner mandate but failed miserably to implement the accord. It didn't deliver on the promises of driving out illegal immigrants, but ministers became involved in scams and vied with each other to amass as much wealth as possible. Ministers and legislators within the party supported ULFA, while the corrupt ministers obliged out of fear. ULFA began to be viewed as an alternative for rescuing Assam from the demographic onslaught from across the border. There was finally a group of people who were above petty politics and partisan interests, or so the people thought. The boys with the guns meant business, and they did not indulge in loose talk like the AGP leaders.

Power flowed from the barrel of the gun, and prestige from the social work that ULFA embarked upon in the villages. Government servants, policemen and tea garden managers were forced to work on embankments, cleaning of community houses, digging ponds, etc. All these were done under the banner of Jatiya Unnayan Parishad (JUP), which officially did not have links with the outfit. Model farms came up in Lakhimpur, and a part of the district was soon declared Muktanchal – liberated zone. Social evils were radically reduced in a majority of the districts in the Brahmaputra Valley. The police obligingly looked the other way when punishments were meted out to criminals and corrupt officials. There was also an attempt to reform the education system through a social code.

As a result, by 1987, ULFA had established a parallel government in Assam. Training camps were set up in the jungles across the state. New batches were trained by cadres, who had returned from Myanmar after serving under the KIA. Crores of rupees were collected from business houses for weapons, and for erecting a war machine to take on the Indian state. More than a hundred people were gunned down during this period,

including political opponents and business executives who either refused to give donations or opposed ULFA policies.[11] All this was too much for New Delhi to tolerate. On 27 November 1990, the AGP government was dismissed, Central rule was imposed, and the army deployed for an all-out offensive against ULFA. However, even before the forces could take up their positions, all the big camps were vacated and the top rung slipped out in time to evade arrest. ULFA had been tipped off about the operation by a minister in the AGP government.[12]

But there were severe drawbacks in the organization's structure which the leadership was neither able to gauge nor check. Many of these issues stemmed from the very factors that facilitated its growth in the late 1980s. In those years, the AGP government turned a blind eye to its operations. This meant that there was no hostile government to oppose ULFA, and the few officials who did were silenced or eliminated. Cadres were groomed in an atmosphere of peace, and even those that returned from eastern Nagaland and Kachin entered into a life of sloth and corruption. They were not used to seeing crores of rupees bundled in stacks, policemen saluting them or highly placed government officials bowing to them in a servile manner. The downslide was rapid and there came a time when many of them were simply waiting for an opportunity to surrender. Within a few months of the crackdown by the army, senior leaders began to examine the possibility of talks with the government. Some went to New Delhi for a meeting with Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and returned convinced that it was futile to continue with the movement. By 1992, hundreds of cadres joined the mainstream.

ULFA had always countered the exodus with fresh recruitment, but the tradition of surrender refused to go away. Cadres deserted camps in Bhutan and Bangladesh, sometimes with weapons, to avail themselves of the surrender benefits from the government. The leadership remained ensconced at posh localities in Dhaka, far removed from the camps and cadres. The very number of cadres that have come overground tells its own story, and could well be the highest among insurgent outfits in India. During the AGP's second regime (1996–2001) alone, as many as 2,128 rebels surrendered.[13] The police and the army were also able to use a section of the surrendered ULFA cadres for committing what has come to be called 'secret killings'. With black scarves masking their faces, the killers descended at the homes of

unsuspecting victims and gunned them down. The victims were mostly innocent relatives of underground cadres or their sympathizers.[14]

These secret killings were just one chapter of the atrocities committed by the surrendered cadres. The list was appalling and long. During their heyday (1996–2001), these overground rebels were given government contracts and allowed to form syndicates that imposed illegal taxes on goods coming into and going out of the state. Even officials and politicians reportedly received a percentage of the extorted money. Of course, there were militants who refrained from these activities; they quietly withdrew from ULFA in much the same way as they had joined. But the damage was done by the bad apples. The fallen standards of the boys who once swore by independence had been exposed. These were the guerrillas that constituted ULFA's armed wing. They had gained entry into ULFA because there had been no policy or procedures on recruitment. It was 'entry for all', and still is, with no screening of any sort.

In 1986, ULFA felt the need to assemble large groups to be sent to Kachin for training after the nod from the KIA in Myanmar. In addition, there were plans to purchase weapons, and more boys would mean more arms and ammunition that could be carried back. District commanders and presidents got on with the task of selecting candidates with a 'good enough physique' who would be able to withstand the rigours of the training and the hardships of the terrain in Myanmar. This sometimes stretched to ridiculous limits. Some in Nalbari and Kamrup were enrolled with the lure of helicopter rides, and some with the assurance that they would be millionaires in an independent Assam soon.[15] One was even told that he would ride back home in a helicopter after six months and land right in the village field – what better way to impress his sweetheart, who had begun to spurn him after he had flunked his exams! After five months, he was heading for Kachin. And as later events proved, very few turned out to be committed to the goals. Most were attracted by the power and prestige ULFA wielded.

According to a former publicity secretary of ULFA, around 90 per cent of the cadres were 'educational dropouts' from a rural background. 'Gone are the days when well-educated boys and girls of all economic segments of Assamese society were attracted to the romantic notion of becoming a "rebel with a cause". The real threat to life had undone the earlier appeal of being an ULFA cadre, and only the really desperate among these joined the ULFA now. Unfortunately, with a stagnating economy and no scope for earning a

livelihood, there was no dearth of desperate youngsters opting for an alternative career. It would not be off the mark to say that ULFA and, for that matter, the various ethnic insurgent outfits cropping up in Assam and in the entire north-east region, actually served as an arena for alternative employment.'[16]

The UFLA failed even at indoctrination, let alone converting new entrants into fanatic activists. ULFA's training manual was ignorant of these aspects. Years ago, it had spelt out a rigorous regimen for cadres, but that remained only on paper. Politics as a subject was taught at the training centres only for a few weeks, and even that only explained the Indian political system and the government's 'colonial policies' in Assam. As a result, only a small percentage subscribed to the idea of independence. For the rest, as a former top functionary said, it meant, 'going to operations continuously until death, which was reason enough to dissuade them from continuing endlessly with the movement'.[17]

For the bigger groups that had sustained in the north-east and elsewhere, recruitment was as important as aspects like finance and procurement of weapons. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, which is currently the largest underground outfit operating in the north-east, exercised 'extra caution' when it came to recruitment. Nobody was allowed to join the organization before the age of eighteen and without the consent of their parents. Before admission, a scrutiny was made of the cadre's public record, which had to be above reproach. Sometimes children who wished to enrol were asked to complete their education first.[18] Surrenders from UNLF and PLA in Manipur and the NSCN(IM) in Nagaland were few, possibly as a result of the policies. LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) supremo V. Prabhakaran too instructed his deputies to recruit people with 'talent for underground work', and all cadres were put through a rigorous test and probation period before being allowed entry into the organization.[19]

Guidelines and policies on all vital aspects crucial to sustenance and expansion are usually evolved before the campaign is launched. These policies pass through debates and discussions, beginning from the framing of the constitution, since it gives direction and an ideological basis to the movement. A section of the ULFA, including Chairman Rajkhowa, did make an effort to frame one right from the mid-1980s, but only an outline ever took shape. The task could be accomplished only in 1992 at Bangladesh's Cox

Bazaar after several brainstorming sessions. Arguments between the proponents of Marxism-Leninism, led by Asanta Baghphukan, on the one hand and Baruah on the other, who was totally opposed to these dogmas, dragged on for days.[20] Scientific socialism was accepted as a goal, but ULFA's interpretation of the concept was too simplistic, like the Treaty of Yandaboo, which ended up bringing Assam into the British dominion in 1826. Disagreement among the leaders precluded a clear elucidation of concepts that would have endeared them to the intelligentsia and the middle class. ULFA rested on weak fundamentals, carried over through neglect and lack of foresight among the leaders. Battling a mighty state like India required meticulous planning more than anything else, and the realization, like in the case of the Maoists in central India, that the war would be long drawn.

The confusion notwithstanding, ULFA was able to develop the colonial theory of Assam being stripped dry of her resources by New Delhi. Convincing instances of the government's apathetic attitude and how the situation has aggravated over time were cited. But beyond that, there was precious little and there were no answers to the volley of questions raised from time to time. It never elaborated its idea of a sovereign Assam beyond saying that everything would be worked out after independence, and the best of all existing systems incorporated. Natural resources were being depleted at an alarming rate, more areas were being occupied by illegal immigrants and, every year, huge chunks of land eroded by the Brahmaputra. Baruah's view that resources could never be exhausted was mystifying; so was the claim of resolving illegal immigration after Assam's independence. Could these issues wait to be resolved? Where would they deport the alien citizens? Their numbers could well be a few million, if census data and other reports are anything to go by. Bangladesh has consistently denied that its citizens were emigrating to Assam and other parts of India. What were its plans of dealing with the ethnic problem in Assam? ULFA's silence on all these queries has been deafening.

To cap it all, ULFA did a complete turnaround on illegal immigration after the top leadership began to take refuge in Dhaka since 1992. By far, this was the biggest blow to ULFA's image and contradicted the very reason for which it came into being. In a fifteen-page booklet addressed to 'The People of Assam of East Bengal Origin', ULFA expanded the meaning of Assamese to include not only the indigenous communities of Assam, but all communities

that had lived and worked for the good of the state. 'We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be a major part of the national life of the people of Assam … The contribution of the people of East Bengal origin in Assam towards increasing the state's economic output is indeed noteworthy. It is this community which produces the state's vegetables, mustard, sesame and 82 per cent of the total jute.' The document concluded by describing the historic six-year agitation against foreigners as one based on 'emotion'. ULFA's goal was to survive even if it meant digressing from the original goals. According to the leadership, only by surviving could the war of liberation continue, and befriending the enemy was only a tactical move for realizing the larger goal.

These moves and manoeuvres did not go down well with the people. Public fury against ULFA reached a crescendo during the Kargil war when Pakistani intruders were declared as Kashmiri freedom fighters. All Assamese soldiers in the Indian Army were asked to desist from fighting them. Even as the appeal was made, the dead body of Captain Jintu Gogoi, killed during action in Kargil, was brought to Assam. Not only was ULFA publicly denounced, there were reports of cadres being publicly lynched. Very few in Assam would opt for supporting Pakistan against India, especially in a war where thousands from the state were enrolled in the Indian armed forces. The leadership failed to gauge the people's psyche, or accept the fact that cultural bonding between Assam and the Indian mainland had existed since historical times. There was never any attempt to assess public opinion, nor any effort made to erect a mechanism that would have helped do this. There were ample incidents to draw lessons from, plenty of scope to rectify and amend. The possibility of introspection and remedial measures was bleak because the chairman and the chief were not on good terms. The wrongs committed went unchecked and what ensued later was a blame game behind each other's backs.[21]

There was another ridiculous episode – when the first batch was training in Kachin in 1988 – that further underscores the leadership's incapability to gauge the situation and make decisions. A cadre named Abani Dutta was allegedly 'caught' passing 'sensitive information' to Indian intelligence agencies. He was ordered to be hacked to death by his colleagues. Dutta was originally recruited by ULFA upon the recommendation of Deputy Commander-in-chief Ratul Kotoky, who, therefore, also came under suspicion of having made efforts for a dialogue with the government. Dutta's

letter to Kotoky, which was sent through a returning cadre, was confiscated and soon a trial was held. The letter apparently had details of the routes and camps in Kachin. Luhit Deuri, who later rose to become staff officer, claimed that he had made a plea for Dutta to be shot and given a quick death. No, the law of the land will prevail, the leadership had argued, and the Kachin hack theirs to death. Soon Dutta lay dead in a pool of blood. Former ULFA functionaries who had been close to Dutta contended that his execution was the price he had paid for his closeness to Kotoky, who was also shot dead a year later on the charge of beginning talks with the government.[22]

These incidents created disquiet within the organization. They were hushed up but they contained the seeds of disintegration and strife. The duo's elimination, in a sense, was the beginning of a process that opposed the growth of healthy criticism, articulation of divergent opinions and disagreement with the leadership. By 1992, the rank and file of the AASU activists had also walked out protesting the absence of a democratic culture in ULFA. These incidents also served to create an impression that ULFA was for and of the Ahom-Motok clique belonging to the Tinsukia-Dibrugarh-Sivasagar stretch in Upper Assam from where the top leadership hailed. Some surrendered cadres were also of the opinion that the divide between Lower and Upper Assam existed from the very beginning of ULFA, and could not be bridged.[23] This chauvinism obscured a clear understanding of the situation in Assam and obstructed the expansion of ULFA's support base among other communities, such as
the tribals.

The organization's brutal acts did not end at Kachin. They were imported after the batches returned to Assam and set up camps. Death sentences were carried out in the goriest manner, which came to light after raids by the army. At the general headquarters in Lakhipathar, arrested 'criminals' who were informers, poachers, pimps and dacoits were put on trial; some were set free after a warning, some let off with fines, and others sentenced to death. Some were ordered to be starved to death or hung on trees for days. The very unfortunate would either be buried alive or lined up in a column and a shotgun fired into the stomach of the person right in front. An average of four people would die on the spot with their stomachs ripped open.[24]

The leadership never bothered to put a system in place to effectively monitor the lower- and middle-rung cadres. The list of innocent people

killed was long and the majority were Assamese, for whom the organization claimed to be fighting. Congress leader Manabendra Sarma was shot dead for no reason and a teenager named Rashmi Bora was abducted and killed in Nagaon on fabricated charges. Instead of being the last option, capital punishment became the first for many who wore ULFA's badge. On several occasions, district commanders fed wrong information for quick approval of their decisions to get their targets eliminated.[25] There were too many cases of dire punishment meted out without proper verification of the offences. Many local businessmen who refused to pay or give in to its demands were terminated – many among these were sympathizers who had helped the group in its formative years.

This was in great part due to the predominance of the military culture in ULFA since its early days. The party followed the gun and not the other way round, as is the norm with revolutionary organizations around the world. In hindsight, it appears that the experiences gained by the organization from its interactions with the Nagas and the Kachin in Myanmar in the formative years left an indelible mark in the minds of the leaders and they were replicated in Assam. Circumstances in eastern Nagaland and Kachin were such that armies came to be vested with enormous powers. Military service had been made mandatory for a few years among the Nagas; in Kachin it was the KIA that called the shots in every sector. Such an approach and strategy may have suited the situation in Myanmar, but was bound to be counterproductive in Assam.

By the late 1980s, the army overshadowed the political wing in ULFA. Many excesses committed by the army were unaccounted for and suggestions given by the other wing were ignored. Weeks ahead of the Indian Army crackdown in 1990, the Kamrup unit had advised the leadership to keep all weapons under lock and key and issue them for use only after proper approval. The plea was ignored and the political wing's marginalization was complete after battalions were created in 1996 and merged with the other wing after a few years. There was confusion when specific functions earmarked for certain posts became blurred. Baruah's grip over the organization tightened, which the chairman and others in the top rungs resented.

The gulf among the leaders further widened after the base in Bhutan was eliminated in late 2003. Bangladesh's support became crucial for ULFA's survival and the government led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was

only too glad to support an insurgent outfit in India aspiring to independence. However, their support came at a heavy price: ULFA began to be dictated by a section of the country's external intelligence agency DGFI and by Pakistan's ISI. Their agenda was to fight a proxy war in the north-east, create disturbances so that additional deployment of the army would be warranted and troops diverted from the northern sector. Thus began the senseless bombings that resulted in huge civilian casualties. The most horrifying of these was the death of fourteen people in Dhemaji, including ten schoolchildren, after a powerful improvised explosive device was set off during the Independence Day celebrations in 2005. Prior to these activities were the wanton killings of Biharis in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh, including people that had lived in Assam for several generations.

There were disasters and wrong decisions galore in ULFA's history. The biggest blunder was in Bhutan, when ULFA underestimated Thimpu's capability to launch an offensive against it. Wasn't the king a frequent visitor to the camps? Did he not shower praise on the boys for their zeal to bring change in Assam? No, an attack was simply not possible, the leadership reckoned. The Royal Bhutan Army was weak and lacked the experience and weapons for a full-scale offensive. ULFA had no inkling of the lethal plan that was being hatched. Thimpu's reluctance and fears were brushed aside by New Delhi; it was time for action. Contingents of the army were trained by Indian instructors and equipped with sophisticated weaponry for an operation against the rebel camps.

The king was still unwilling to launch a full-scale offensive. He felt that the security of the southern districts bordering Assam would be jeopardized if these rebels were evicted by force. At a meeting with ULFA representatives in Thimpu in 2001, he offered to give Rs 200 crore to the outfit and assistance in transferring all the cadres to Myanmar.[26] He reiterated the same stance in another meeting, two months before the operation, when a delegation comprising Foreign Secretary Shashadhar Choudhury and two of the other topmost functionaries, Bhim Kanta Buragohain and Asanta Baghphukan, had called on him. Choudhury claimed that the king's proposals could have been implemented and the operation prevented.[27]

There was no response from ULFA. The leadership assumed that there was no need for alarm because such reminders had been coming for so many years. Nevertheless, on the morning of 15 December 2003, guns began to boom from all directions. A few mortar shells also exploded inside the

bigger camps. The operation had begun, but the leadership was unable to decide whether to fight back or to surrender. Within a week, all the camps, including those of NDFB and KLO (Kantapur Liberation Organization), were dismantled. According to ULFA's records, seventeen cadres were either dead or untraceable, including six top functionaries and two staff officers, Bening Rabha and Robin Neog, whose whereabouts are still not known. Women and children who surrendered to the army were later handed over to India. Those who were able to wriggle out dispersed to Assam, Meghalaya and Bangladesh.

In any case, there had been ample indications that ULFA's days in the kingdom were numbered. The Royal Bhutan Assembly had passed a resolution in its seventy-eighth session asking ULFA and the other rebel groups to leave Bhutan. The government had also issued an ultimatum to the militants to vacate the territory peacefully, failing which the military option would be exercised. ULFA functionaries who were close to government officials were supposedly warned months in advance about frequent meetings that were being held between the armies of India and Bhutan and the flurry of diplomatic activity between the two capitals. There was also a rumour after the operations that a Bhutanese army officer was penalized severely for informing ULFA about the impending offensive.

ULFA's poor understanding of the national and international scenario proved to be a stumbling block preventing a realistic outlook. India treated Bhutan as its protectorate and Thimpu couldn't ignore New Delhi's concerns indefinitely. The crackdown was bound to happen sooner or later. It was rather surprising, in fact, how ULFA and its allies (NDFB and KLO) managed to retain a huge number of camps for more than a decade. Alarm bells started ringing in Bangladesh as well after the Awami League assumed power towards the end of 2008. The League had been reluctant to go after the militants when it had won the elections in 1996. However, the situation had undergone a change a decade later. Dhaka had pending demands before India and it could not hope to wrest concessions unless it cracked the whip on the rebels. And it soon did, swooping down on all the top functionaries and handing them over to India.

Baruah firmly believed that a war between India and China was inevitable and would likely take place around 2016–17. According to him, the provocation would come from the US, and China would be forced to retaliate. He also explained that the 'mistake committed in 1962 during the

Chinese Aggression by the people of Assam would not be repeated'. It was highly possible that ULFA was banking upon Chinese support for the independence of the region. But would China embark on a collision course with India? In 1962, its objective seemed to have been only to teach India a lesson and its army withdrew within two months of the invasion. Wasn't it too simplistic to assume that the Chinese army would walk in, liberate Assam, and then hand it over to ULFA?

There were too many questions and very few answers. There was no accounting of the funds collected and distributed. A colossal amount seemed to have been embezzled by the lower- and middle-rung cadres because there was no mechanism to ensure that the entire corpus had been given to the leadership. There were even reports of cadres decamping with the booty after killing their colleagues. Not surprisingly, many functionaries plunged headlong into business after coming overground.

To be fair though, an efficient system for smooth transfer of funds was in place for many years. Money was deposited at specific locations in Bhutan and West Bengal, which was then delivered in dollars in Dhaka, Bangkok and other destinations. Investments were made in Bangladesh and new sources of earnings tapped. But that system had negative fallouts as well. Baruah's adversaries alleged that he sought to appropriate financial powers, even though there was a secretary exclusively in charge of the department. Rajkhowa's pleas to summon a meeting of the executive committee to resolve these issues could never become a reality. The gulf became unbridgeable and, finally, Baruah decided to prepare a new team for Assam's 'liberation struggle'. It is still too early to say which way the separatist movements will swing, but it is quite unlikely that they will be wiped out very soon.

The government has been trumpeting its success in coming to grips with insurgency in the north-east. True, there has been a downward slide for violence in the region in the past few years. Accords have been clinched with some more rebel groups, and dialogues have been on with many more for a negotiated settlement. Nevertheless, the conditions in the region that gave birth to insurgency have not withered away. Currently there are more than seventy outfits active in the north-east, with Manipur having the biggest count. No region in the world has given birth to so many insurgencies, not even Myanmar or all of Africa, possibly. It stands to reason that something is drastically wrong in this area. By no stretch of imagination can the phenomenon be dismissed as a law-and-order problem. The government has

always been focused on short-term goals – how to disarm these groups, dismantle their camps and come to an agreement. Therefore, the alienation has persisted. No government has addressed the real issues, among them the fact that there are very few job opportunities, and girls and boys from the region seeking jobs have been leaving for other cities in large numbers every year. The inhuman methods employed by security forces, extrajudicial killings and the continuance of draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, have further worsened the situation. In July 2013, an independent panel set up by the Supreme Court to investigate six cases of encounter deaths in Manipur found that all were extrajudicial executions by the security forces.

There is no denying that certain issues raised by ULFA are genuine and have the support of the people. The argument that Assam was being economically exploited is borne out by facts. To cite an example: the royalty per tonne of crude oil extracted from the state was Rs 2,500, which was revised to Rs 4,500 only in 2012. Furthermore, there was a glaring mismatch in the calculation of royalty, which is yet to be rectified. Underpayment by the oil majors to the state government resulted in a loss of Rs 850 crore during 2009–10, which has also been pointed out by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India. The state government has been demanding revision of the system so that royalty can be calculated on the well-head price determined by the actual price of crude oil in the international market instead of the sale price. The demand has not yet been accepted, despite repeated representations by the state.[28]

There were other instances that reeked of a strange reluctance by the Centre to gauge the region's problems correctly. Illegal immigration from Bangladesh has continued unabated and the demographic imbalance in the state is clear from census reports. True, the task of detection and deportation of alien citizens is onerous, but stringent preventive measures are yet to be put in place. It is so easy for an immigrant to settle down in Assam and gather the necessary documents that one Mohammad Kamaluddin even contested from the Jamunamukh assembly constituency in 1996! He was deported after getting evidence that he was not an Indian national. Flood and erosion are annual features that have destroyed lakhs of hectares of land in the state. The government has no strategy to cope with this danger, nor is it concerned enough to accept the demand that they be declared national problems. For ULFA, the answer is simple: the government does not care to resolve the

burning issues of a region that is merely a 'colony' of the country.

To this day, there is ample indication that sympathy for the ULFA has not waned completely. Life comes to a standstill during the bandhs it calls. Most would still make a strong case for serious dialogue with ULFA to resolve the issues. In short, ULFA's decreasing popularity does not mean that the government has won acceptability and gained credibility. As such, it is also erroneous to assume that the anti-talks faction led by Baruah will not gather new recruits. There will always be a section to support the hard-line approach and subscribe to the continuation of the armed campaign. Weapons are much easier to obtain now and new potent sources have emerged in China and elsewhere. ULFA proved itself quite capable of forging links – sometimes at the highest levels of the government – to ensure the free and uninterrupted movement of its functionaries and flow of guns and money. In this regard, ULFA stands head and shoulders above other militant outfits in the north-east.

An interesting episode that took place in Bhutan in the late 1990s reveals ULFA's knack for cultivating reliable contacts. It firmed up a deal in China for supply of a consignment of weapons consisting mainly of assault rifles, pistols, grenades and ammunition. The plan was to drop the shipment at a convenient location on the Sino-Bhutan border and then have them transferred to the camps in the southern districts. The teams that were sent to recce the icy frontier were spotted by Indian intelligence agencies. Thimpu was warned by New Delhi and senior Bhutanese officials told ULFA to abandon the mission and wait for a few months. If they did that, the weapons would be irretrievably buried in the snow – a crisis in a situation where the organization was already shortage of ammunition. But a clever strategy was devised a few months later. Weapons in large quantities were soon dropped in the camps one night by Bhutanese army trucks. Senior functionaries who were witness to the incident surmised that the weapons were brought from the border where they had been deposited more than a year ago.[29]

It was the same story in Bangladesh where ULFA had been able to operate smoothly for close to two decades. A formidable network came into being within two years after a small group led by ULFA foreign secretary Munin Nabis landed in the country in 1988. Nabis became 'Iqbal Bhai' and even won an election held by the Dhaka Municipal Corporation. After setting up small business ventures, he proceeded to Pakistan as a business executive in order to present ULFA's case before the ISI, which was only too eager to

open its doors. The ground was prepared for the leadership to move in and pitch tent in Dhaka, and batches of cadres were sent to the AfPAK region for training.[30] An accomplice of Nabis, who was also sent to the neighbouring country, submitted a detailed dossier to the high command spelling out the strategy to adopt, with a clear list of dos and don'ts for establishing a base. His argument, in a nutshell, was that, 'everything is possible in Bangladesh if you have money and the right connections'.

In times of crisis, or whenever it was pushed to the wall by security forces, ULFA was able to wriggle out by astutely manoeuvring the media and civil society organizations. The army or the police were invariably on the back foot whenever there were mass protests against its actions and negative publicity in the media. So counter-insurgency operations were temporarily withdrawn in the areas concerned, and this gave rebels ample space to scrape through to safety. In 2005, a hideout was about to be busted by the army at Dibru Saikhowa National Park in Dibrugarh. Top commanders of ULFA's dreaded 28 Battalion were holed up and they had all but given up hope of emerging unscathed from the operation. Baruah instructed them to hold on for a few more days with the assurance that steps would be taken to call off the army's deployment in the park.[31] But how? The media carried headlines the next day saying that ULFA was keen to expedite the peace process with the government. ULFA brought together a group of eminent personalities to form the People's Consultative Group (PCG). Their mandate was to expedite the peace process. There is a difference of opinion over the actual reasons that triggered the creation of this group, but former cadres of 28 Battalion steadfastly believe that it was formed to put an end to the operation by the army. Baruah has also admitted that the talks were meant only to make an assessment of the position that would be adopted by the Indian government vis-à-vis their demands. Nonetheless, the army withdrew and the cadres slipped out safely to Arunachal Pradesh. The peace process crumbled after about a year, following many rounds of talks between the PCG and the government, where the latter refused to accept the preconditions laid down by ULFA. Three years later, the battalion's senior commanders and a majority of the cadres came overground, alleging that the leadership was unmindful of the ground reality in Assam.

However, the chief refuted the charges, convinced that he had been right in adopting a rigid posture with New Delhi. Dialogue with the government, he reiterated, would be possible if, and only if, the government was willing to

discuss Assam's sovereignty, a precondition to all talks. Until then the campaign would continue, and with greater intensity, because ULFA had been strengthened and reorganized. 'An unforgivable injustice would be done to Assam if a leader of prominence puts his signature on an agreement with the government that does not uphold Assam's sovereignty because the injustice will continue,' he said, adding, 'We will never commit that mistake.'

6

The Realm of Baba

The ground was slick with dew in the morning. Walking downhill could be risky on days like these, because of how slippery the path becomes. Fortunately, the ground was just fine as we took a leisurely tour of the plains on the northern side of the camp, the bottom of our trousers tucked into long socks because we didn't want bloodsucking insects to have a good time, and we certainly didn't want to fall prey to the damdim again. However, small leeches were soon swarming all over our shoes and clothes.

Our destination was a camp of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), an outlawed group with a base among the Bodo community in Assam. With us were Moran and two seniors from the camp. We had been invited for dinner and I was really looking forward to conversations with these rebels and mighty glad about the opportunity to look around. We trotted through grass, at times tall like sugar cane, and sharp enough to slash us viciously if we were careless. We were walking on the usual path we took for our evening walks, until we deviated from it to a narrower one that vanished into the undergrowth, appeared again and then brought us on to a wider track. At a distance, four wooden houses appeared on either side of the road. They were mostly two- or three-room structures on a raised plinth built by the Pangmi Nagas, who had descended from the hills. They were fast adapting to a new lifestyle in the plains, with new cultural adaptions that are expected to cause far-reaching changes in all aspects of their lives in times to come. They had been advised to migrate by Sangwang Sangnyu Khaplang, aka Baba, a man they saw as their protector.

This was the nerve centre of Baba's domain and the government he had established – the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) – in a part of the Naga-inhabited areas across India and Myanmar. It was an enormous territory, sparsely populated and incredibly scenic. But how could this place appear so calm when media reports claimed that the Myanmarese army regularly raided it? Apparently, the army had been targeting GPRN for

demanding independence and also because it had allowed rebel groups from the north-east to set up base in the region. The people in the camp had said that the weather conditions were quite extreme around here, near freezing in winter and a furnace in summer. There were gold mines close by; some said the entire place was floating on gold. Hence the high temperature, they said. Another theory was that there were 'hot gases' beneath the ground that came out during the summer.

There were more houses further down the road and even a few shops. 'Take off your shoes, please,' an elderly lady said in broken Nagamese as I was about to enter one of them. I picked up some 'Made in Thailand' Coca Cola cans, chocolates and a Thuraya model satellite phone from a rack. The lady did not know the price of the phone and her husband was away. I was hoping to buy a couple of machetes, but the ones available here were short and of poor quality. A handsome olive green jacket hung on the wall. I immediately wanted to buy it, but was told it was reserved for someone. The lady suggested that I return after two days.

Moran revealed that these shops sold a wide range of items – from rice to petrol and motorbikes – which were smuggled through the overland and riverine routes from China, Thailand and towns in Myanmar. The customers were primarily rebels at the numerous camps in the area and seldom the locals who were involved in farming.

'Can you guess how much they sell every day?' Moran asked.

'No idea, but I reckon it must be good with so many cadres and camps here.'

'There's nothing that one doesn't get here. Although sometimes one has to wait for certain products after the order is placed.'

'I think I would like to open a shop here.'

'Done. You will have to come and live here permanently then.'

At the NDFB camp, commander-in-chief I.K. Songbijit was waiting for us on the veranda of a small, neat thatched cottage. We were garlanded with the traditional gamusa and, after green tea, he offered to take us around the camp. Much like the place we were staying at, this too was spread over asymmetric, undulated terrain with creeks all around. Atop each mound was a structure made of bamboo and straw, which was either a bunker or the living quarters of the cadres. It was surrounded by vegetation – shrubs and grass mainly, and a few tall trees on its eastern and southern flanks.

I began the conversation with the chief and was careful not to ask too much

about the NDFB, heeding Moran's advice.

'So, Mr Songbijit, how's life here?'

'We are doing fine.'

'But life is tough here. And quite expensive as well.'

'Yes, prices have been steadily rising,' he said with a smile. 'As you have seen, this place is remote and nearly inaccessible.'

'That's true. Frankly, one has to be really sturdy and fit to survive here,' I said as I jumped over a pebbled brook. We arrived at a Y point. The road to our right ended a few metres ahead and turned into a track leading into the undergrowth. We took the left turn, reached a hillock and headed for the hut at its summit.

'This is where I stay. We have to be alert all the time.'

'Yes, but you seem to have a very efficient information flow, and that will warn you in advance.'

'Yes, we hope so, but then you can never lower your guard.'

'We have met many of your boys on the way, and at one place they treated us to coffee.'

'They are scattered, and always on the move,' said Songbijit.

We retraced our steps and proceeded to a hut below where dinner was served with rice, boiled chicken and vegetables.

Songbijit, always dressed in fatigues, was a quiet man who spoke little. I got the impression that he was both confident and confused. He headed the third faction in the organization, which had decided to chart a different course by joining hands with rebel groups campaigning for independence of the north-east. He was running low on cadres and trying to shore up the finances.

Like the other outfits, NDFB thrived on the groundswell of grievances among the Bodos in Assam, especially in the Christian pockets of Sonitpur, Udalguri, Darrang and Baksa. Over the years, many cadres and top functionaries had been killed in operations. Its areas of operation were limited, as were its resources. A number of camps had been set up in Bhutan, cadres trained and networks established in Bangladesh. Some batches received training in the AfPak region as well, and they seemed just as committed to the cause as the Manipuri boys. They were held in awe, and also feared because they indulged in senseless killings of civilians.

In one such act on 30 October 2008, which was undoubtedly the biggest strike ever by an insurgent outfit in the north-east, eight blasts were triggered

in Assam, including four in Guwahati, killing eighty-nine people and leaving scores injured. The key conspirators, including the chief, Ranjan Daimary, who had ordered the carnage, were arrested. The entire operation was supposedly carried out at the behest of the ISI and a section of DGFI that was unhappy with the growing bonhomie between the Indian and Bangladeshi armed forces. Aghast at the bloodletting, the faction that was overground in designated camps, headed by Govinda Basumatary, expelled Daimary. He was later apprehended in Bangladesh and handed over to India.[1]

The NDFB's dilemma was typical of the insurgent outfits in the north-east after they came overground following ceasefire agreements with the government. Ginger groups have often sprouted from the mother organization. Autonomy to Assam's Bodo areas had already been granted under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution after the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) inked an accord with the government in 2003. The government had categorically ruled out changes in the territorial boundaries of the existing states in the north-east. As such, the demand for a separate state of Bodoland, raised from time to time by different organizations, including the overground faction of NDFB, was turned down by the government in much the same way as it dealt with demands for homelands by militant outfits across the region.

We finished the meal and chatted for a while, with Songbijit asking us about the situation in Assam and seeking details from us on a few matters. We left soon after.

Later in the evening, Moran told us that he would take us to another camp the next day. In the morning, we were back on the trail with the same group, but heading in a different direction. Each of us carried a bag with water bottles and glucose. We were heading for the camp of a lesser-known group from Manipur called the United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK). Songbijit was aware that we were journalists; Moran reminded us that we were to introduce ourselves as ULFA functionaries at this camp.

The UPPK came into being in 2006 after a faction led by Chinglemba Mangang walked out of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) following differences with the leadership. PREPAK suffered another jolt in 2011 when another group, attaching the word 'progressive' to its name, broke away to set up its own camps. Disunity has been the bane of the Manipuri guerrillas and there was hardly any organization in the state that had not suffered a split. While PLA appeared to have the least dissension so far, the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) has been the worst, with more

than ten factions splintering from the parent organization. However, despite the different banners, these groups in eastern Nagaland remained committed to their goals. There were very few instances of squabbles among them, even though they all have their bases in the Imphal Valley. Their counterparts in Assam and Nagaland ought to draw lessons from these groups and abstain from the fratricidal killings that has eroded their support base among the general populace.

A lot of blue came into our line of vision as we approached the camp. These were the tarpaulin sheets of a big barrack whose layout seemed similar to that of the NDFB's, small and tidy, with the jungle as a backdrop. We were stopped at the camp gate by a young sentry, who stood inside a guardhouse with an M-16 rifle mounted on sandbags. A few minutes later, a middle-aged officer received us. He saluted Moran, shook hands with us, and identified himself as Captain Indra, head of the camp. In Nagamese, Moran said we were returning from some work and had decided to halt here. We sat on the porch of Indra's home.

I was riveted by the firing session taking place in the backyard. Three cadres were practising target shooting with a rifle that was different from what I had seen in the camps so far. I asked if I could get a close look of it. It was a .22 rifle, a highly valued item in the region for small game. I collected a few empty cartridges as mementoes, and then picked up the sleek Belgian rifle. It was much lighter than the models I had seen earlier. I wanted to test my shooting skills.

'Can I try my luck?' I asked the commander.

'Why not?' He instructed the cadres in Meitei to bring more cartridges.

'If I hit the target with my first shot, I will take away the rifle.'

'Done … let me load the rifle,' he said with a laugh.

The target was a circular piece of paper on a bamboo stand about 30 metres away. I took aim, fired and missed. I squeezed the trigger repeatedly, but each shot was only slightly better than the previous one and the target remained whole. I handed the rifle to a young man who smartly reloaded the weapon, took aim and hit the edge of the target in one go.

'You win, I lose,' I conceded.

'This is a very good rifle. How long are you here for, sir?'

'We will be around for some time.'

We left after tea. Later that evening, we were informed that Baba would meet us after two days. But what were we to do in the interim? Visit another

camp? Moran eventually joined us, and told us that we had received an invite from yet another group to visit them. However, we were strictly forbidden to write about the outfit by name anywhere.

The camp was only a couple of hours away. We chatted with the commanders and looked around the new campsite. It had more barracks and cadres than the other camps. I listened to their conversation with Moran.

One of them said to me, 'We haven't seen you here before. Are you based somewhere else?'

'Yes, this is my first visit to this region. Our work is mainly in foreign countries and liaising with various agencies,' I replied.

'I hope you are enjoying this place. It's a good thing you did not come in summer. That's when you have to deal with the weather, leeches and disease,' remarked a senior, bespectacled functionary.

'Yes, I have been briefed about the summer months in this region. I am enjoying my stay here.'

'Great, then you must come again before you leave,' he said.

We returned to our base in the evening. After dinner, I readied the recorder for the last time and formulated the structure of my interview with Baba. The next afternoon, Moran offered to take me on a motorcycle ride to a few shops nearby. It was bumpy and I was nearly thrown off from the bike several times. There were four shops similar to the ones we had seen earlier. I went into one and found the exact same jacket that I had seen the other day and grabbed it. The shopkeeper refused to take my money, and I was hesitant to accept it as a gift. Moran suggested I should take it.

'We cannot allow you to spend anything as you are our guests. This will look great on you,' he said, and picked up the jacket and put it into the saddlebag of the motorbike. 'And here's something else that could be helpful to you. This is Kachin blood tonic.'

'What is it for? I sincerely hope it has not been made from the blood of vipers and dragons.'

Moran laughed. 'No, this is a herbal tonic and good for people who are on the march. So keep a few bottles with you.'

Why was it called blood tonic? He did not know. I took four bottles and later found it to be a perfect antidote for indigestion. Moran drove the motorcycle through a longer route and stopped in the middle of a cluster of houses. We headed for an ongoing construction of concrete and wood that seemed like a school. No, this would be the first big hospital of the Naga

government, he explained. Many villages will benefit, though for the hill dwellers it would still mean walking through the valley for at least five days in the case of a medical emergency. For those located in the far south, the only option would be to make their way to the hospital facilities in the townships that had sprung up around the army cantonments.

We walked through a door and stepped inside a large hall to find wooden beds arranged in two rows. Moran said there would be doctors, nurses and a facility for the treatment of some common diseases, mainly related to the stomach and liver. Medicines would not be a problem because there were supply routes from the neighbouring countries. At one end of the hall was a stairway leading to the first floor where more beds would be placed along with storerooms for medicines. My thoughts went to an article that I had read in a magazine some years ago, something about robots performing surgery on a patient in the US. And here in eastern Nagaland even a hospital was an alien concept. They lived and died without ever seeing a doctor and by taking recourse to local remedies for serious ailments. This initiative offered a beacon of hope.

A few metres away was a church, also newly built. I touched a 4-foot-tall empty artillery shell, hung vertically near the door. I had seen smaller versions in a few villages in the hills, but this one was much bigger and heavier. These shells had been left behind by the Allied Forces after the withdrawal of the Japanese troops during the war and were now used as a bell to summon people. Wreckages of crashed aircraft had also been found at many spots in the hills and the valleys. But Moran's revelation that huge quantities still lay buried in the hills was a surprise. Whenever a live bomb was found, the explosive was extracted and sold for blast fishing in the rivers. There were still some places where flare-ups and 'balls of fire' were sighted regularly.

We rode back to the camp and sat down with Baruah, who reminded us about the dos and don'ts for the interview with Khaplang. We agreed to all his conditions and retired to our rooms. The plan was to leave early the next morning, stay there for two nights, and then return to the ULFA camp for the grand party that the chief threw every year for Christmas.

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We were at Khaplang's camp by 9 a.m. and were received by two secretaries who identified themselves as Joseph and Yongkong. Again, the place was completely at variance with the formation I had imagined. I had envisaged the

headquarters of GPRN to be sprawling with at least a hundred cadres in jungle fatigues brandishing assault rifles. Or at least fifty, like the ULFA and other camps. But here, it was even smaller. There were only six structures of bamboo and straw in all, including a small hut that I presumed to be the chief's, and only around twenty cadres. It was located on a plain stretch with jungle on three sides.

We sat in a cosy pagoda-like shack without walls, which was meant for guests and senior officers. A table was laid out with chairs and a file each for Pradip and myself. The file contained a two-page detailed account of a legendary general, Karang, who was a terror to the Myanmarese army. He came to be called Baba Karang out of reverence by the GPRN officials and the rebel groups based in this region. The same has been the case with Khaplang and another renowned general, Khole Konyak, who now stays in Nagaland. I had heard about Karang from the ULFA boys during the trek and decided to procure information about him. He died of an illness last year at the age of sixty-two, and had remained unwavering in his support of the man that I would be interviewing shortly.

I caught a glimpse of the leader in an adjacent hut. He was dressed in a light brown shirt, longyi and a black jacket, talking to senior colleagues who were perhaps from the neighbouring villages. Baba didn't seem to have changed much from the photographs I had seen about a decade ago. Somebody said he was in his early seventies and lean like the typical Naga, although he looked rather old for his age. Unlike the image in my head, he appeared to be a lively, amiable man. There was a hearing aid dangling from his right ear. We could hear the others speak to him in a loud tone and, possibly, repeat their statements every now and then. A few visitors who had come to see the old man were asked to come back the following week.

As we sipped tea, I realized that an interview similar to Baruah's would not be possible. Baba could not be expected to sit with us the whole day and answer our queries. The pace would also be less because the questions would have to be repeated and may even have to be translated to his mother tongue, Pangmi. I could faintly hear him conversing in Nagamese but the accent was different from the one spoken in Nagaland and in the Konyak region. An interpreter would be essential, and so I asked Joseph to sit with us during the interview. I decided to ask him precise questions about the current situation and move to the history of the Naga movement if it were possible on the following day.

Pradip and I rose with a namaskar as the chief entered. We shook hands and I gifted him a blue cotton shirt. 'Baba, we are grateful to you for permitting us to visit this place. Your officers in the villages have been extremely helpful to us,' Pradip said, and then repeated the statement in a louder tone.

'We are also grateful to you. It is necessary for you to see the situation yourself and gauge everything. You have walked a far distance to reach us and must be tired. So please relax, stay for a few months and then decide when to leave,' Baba said.

I drew my chair closer to him, and said, 'Baba we would love to stay long, but we will have to hold on to our jobs as well. In fact, we told our bosses that we would be back in forty-five days but now it looks like it will be almost four months before we complete this assignment.'

'I can understand that. Okay, but you must enjoy your stay here. Let me know if I can be of any help to you.'

'We are enjoying our time here. It's a wonderful change for us too. Back home, we seem to have very little time for ourselves,' I replied.

Pradip told Joseph to begin the interview and soon the old man was looking at the camera and responding to questions. Half an hour, it was time for my session.

'Baba, tell us something about your birth and schooling,' I began.

'I was born in Waktham in 1940 sometime in April. Like all old Naga of my age, I cannot recall the date,' he replied with a laugh. 'I was the youngest among ten siblings, six males and four females. I was enrolled for a year at a school in Assam's Margherita. And then I moved around in different schools in Burma (Myanmar). I studied at Myitkyina in Kachin up to class four, and then moved to Kalemyo. For a while, I was also a schoolteacher at Namlip (in Myanmar) before joining the movement.'

'And your family?'

'I have four sons and a daughter. One son died long ago, just a few years after his birth. They are all settled in different places, comfortably and far from this zone.'

'Are they not willing to join you here?'

'No. They are reluctant to come here … life is dangerous here,' Baba said with a laugh.

'Baba, when did you convert to Christianity, and why?'

'I was converted to Christianity in 1957 along with eleven other Naga people. I knew Christianity would help unify the Nagas, put an end to

superstitions and the inter-village clashes, and my assessment was not wrong. Today, the situation here is very different from what it was three decades ago.'

I told him we would discuss that, as well as the genesis of the conflict with the Myanmarese government and much else in detail the next day. For the moment, I wanted to know whether he had a ceasefire agreement with the junta.

Baba thought for a few moments before replying. 'The junta had approached us for a ceasefire after decades of conflict but we said we were not interested. We told them that it's quite straightforward for us – we kill if you kill and we won't if you don't.'

'So there is some kind of an understanding with them?' I was certain he would deny any secret pact because if one existed, it might bring the Myanmarese government under pressure from New Delhi.

His reply was astonishing. 'Yes, you could put it that way if you like, and this has been on for the past several years. The first proposal came from them, but they reneged on their commitment and attacked one of our camps in 2000 in Namjung. We warned them. Again, they approached us a year later, and since then there has been no hostility between us.'

This had long been suspected, and his admission would be of great interest to many. Baba had finally disclosed the reason why the repeated pleas by the Indian government to its Myanmarese counterpart had fallen on deaf ears. It also meant that whatever was being written in newspapers on conflicts between the army and the rebels was absolutely trash.

'But why do you not have a written agreement with the junta?'

He laughed. 'No party is interested. As far as we are concerned, a written agreement could be problematic. If we put our signatures, they will soon come up with the demand to evict the groups from the north-east, and we will not accept that. It will be a big loss for us. Furthermore, it will also open up avenues for New Delhi to put pressure on the Myanmarese government. You must be aware of the fact that the Indian government has been pressuring the government here to raid and destroy our camps.'

'Yes, Baba, we know that, but what benefits have you derived from this understanding?'

'It has come as a big relief to the common man and the villages. Now they can live and sleep in peace. There were occasions earlier when entire villages had to be evacuated for fear of retaliation by the army. Now there is

normalcy in the region, and we still don't pay any tax to them (the army). More importantly, the understanding has helped like-minded revolutionary organizations in eastern Nagaland and India's north-east to join forces.'

This was yet another candid admission that had been a bit of an open secret for many years.

'So you fully support the revolutionary groups from India's north-east and their agenda?' I asked.

'You see, the north-east is not a part of India, be it historically, politically or geographically. It has been forcefully incorporated into the Indian Union. The region and its people are closer to us than the Indian mainland and that is why we have come together. We will campaign together for sovereignty and independence.'

'What kind of cooperation do you have with the north-eastern revolutionary groups? What is the status of the movement now?'

'Now we have been able to bring all the organizations together. There are seven groups from Manipur alone. Besides these, there are ULFA and NDFB, and there is representation from Tripura and Meghalaya as well. We have resolved to fight together and the movement is gathering force.'

'When we were on the march, I heard that years ago, the Indian Army had often ventured surreptitiously into eastern Nagaland for operations. I suppose this is the primary reason for the Myanmarese junta's continued distrust of New Delhi,' I said.

'Yes, yes, you are right,' he said after Joseph repeated what I'd said, like he had had to do quite often. 'The Indian Army had launched operations in this region between 1978 and 1982, in the villages not very far from the border. Indian security forces were very concerned when they heard about the formation of the NSCN, and prior to that they were targeting the people who had opposed the agreement (the Shillong Accord) between a faction of Naga National Council (NNC) and the government in 1975. However, their success was limited because you can't operate here without knowing the terrain. There have also been joint operations by the Indian and Myanmarese armies against the NSCN. Fortunately, we have survived all these attempts. We have retaliated only when it was necessary.'

'That means the two armies have been cooperating for quite some time now. After the Indian government began supporting the pro-democracy movement, the situation changed, which obviously was not liked by the junta. And this has worked in your favour, naturally.'

Baba just shook his head and fell silent. I had expected him to say something, but he did not, so I moved on to the next question.

'What are the areas in eastern Nagaland that you now administer and control?'

'The entire eastern Nagaland. There is the eastern Khiamniungan region where the NNC is still strong, but we also have a presence there.'

'You mean Phizo's NNC,' I exclaimed. This was startling information as I had believed that the organization was almost finished. In Nagaland, it is the smallest rebel group with hardly any influence. I said as much to Baba.

'Yes Phizo's NNC. He had support among the Khiamniungan tribe on both sides of the border.'

'But how do you manage to administer such a vast region without roads or infrastructure?' The saving grace, I suppose, are the new wireless gadgets that ensure communication with remote and far-flung places. I asked Baba for his views.

Baba said that his secretaries would be able to reply to the question since they were in daily touch with the party and government functionaries. Joseph chipped in and explained that the communication system had improved over the past five years, but the equipment was expensive. Some had to be ordered months in advance through agents who had contacts with dealers in foreign countries.

I turned to Baba again. 'Tell me something about opium addiction. This is something I have noticed everywhere in your region, except in one village. Haven't you ever tried to put a stop to this?'

'We have been doing our best to explain to the people to abstain from smoking opium. However, the farmers always ask us one thing: what alternative will you give us? It is used as a medicine, consumed as an intoxicant and sold sometimes. It is difficult to give them an answer. How will we make medicines available? And how can we give the farmer an extra source of income? You have seen the territory yourself. Don't you think this is like the Wild West? Soon, hopefully, medical treatment will be possible. You must have seen the new hospital that is coming up nearby, and more will be started shortly.'

In the hills, I was told that opium was sometimes consumed to get relief from body aches and stomach ailments. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that it was valued more as an intoxicant. Tea was served and we took a short break. Joseph reminded us that Baba would have a hectic schedule from

midday the next day, and we would have to finish everything before that. 'Yes, that's fine with me. Although I wish I had met him ten years ago,' I responded, helping myself to three delicious Chinese pancakes and washing them down with the tea.

'Baba, tell me one big difference between Nagaland and eastern Nagaland.'

'The attitude of the government, which claims to govern these regions,' he said. 'In eastern Nagaland, people only know the GPRN, and there is no other government. Am I not right? When you trekked through the region, you would have seen very few government symbols. Up until a few years ago, the Myanmarese army's only task was to raid the villages periodically and leave behind a trail of death and destruction. In Nagaland too, security forces have burnt down villages. But the government there has also built roads, schools and hospitals.'

That was true. 'Do you have any plans for setting up schools in this region?'

'Yes, we do have plans. You must have seen classrooms in the villages. We are also building a school in this area.'

'As you know, the Indian government has begun investing in infrastructure in Myanmar. The Kolodyne project is in addition to other projects. Will you welcome investments made in your region?'

'Why not? Nobody has bothered to do anything for us and development projects require huge investments. We will allow the Indian government to invest here, provided our objectives are not hindered. And, of course, it (the Indian government) should not have any political goals or any hidden agenda.'

'What kind of a structure do you envisage after the independence of the region?'

'If we stay united, recognition will be easier. We will be one country and all arrangements will be firmed up on consensus. Perhaps a federation like the United States of America would be desirable because this region is multilingual and multi- ethnic.'

'Your organization has suffered a split recently. Some of your most trusted aides, like Commander-in-chief Khole Konyak and Prime Minister N. Kitovi Zhimomi have walked out and have now decided to chart their own course. Will this not hamper your movement?'

'Kitovi and Khole do not have any agenda. They are groping in the dark, highly confused. Khole was brainwashed by R&AW when he went to New

Delhi for treatment. They have not been able to convince the rank and file of our organization to go with them. Only some areas, where they exercised influence, have gone with them. We condemn their decision. Their only option now is to surrender to the Indian government because they will not know what to talk.'

'We found this development very surprising. What led to the discord?'

'This is not the outcome of a power struggle. More like the outcome of different opinions on fundamental issues.'

'Will you agree to a formal ceasefire with the Indian government? Now that there is a split, New Delhi might want to conclude separate agreements with both the factions.'

'We already have an informal understanding in Manipur. And we have made our stand clear – we will be neutral if you don't act against us and we will retaliate if you are hostile to us. The situation is the same in Arunachal Pradesh. There is a ceasefire only in Nagaland and this is for tactical reasons. We have to recruit people and gather funds in Nagaland, and all this would be difficult without a ceasefire.'

'Has the Indian government ever proposed talks with you?'

'We are not particularly bothered, and we will not go for talks unless there is commitment from the government that the focus of the dialogue would be the independence of the Naga territory. So even if there is a proposal, we are likely to reject it.'

'You must have heard about the growing spread of Maoism in India and they are working towards establishing a base in the north-east as well. What is your view?'

'We have no understanding with them. They are mainly in central India and they are not campaigning for independence of any particular region. But we have not closed our doors completely to a tactical understanding with them.'

'The Isak–Muivah faction of NSCN is engaged in talks with the government and an agreement might soon be inked. What do you feel?'

'Yes, they are harping about the integration of Naga-inhabited areas in the north-east under a single administrative banner. In any case, the government has already rejected this demand. Integration should have been done decades ago in the early 1960s when the state of Nagaland was formed. Now it will not be possible. Now, all the neighbouring states, like Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, will oppose the demand. In fact, they have already opposed it. There could be a civil war in Manipur if integration of Naga-

inhabited areas takes place. Nothing will be achieved. The movement will be weakened. In fact, Muivah is notorious for betraying comrades. Many years ago he had founded a united front of revolutionary groups in the north-east, but he ditched everybody and went ahead for talks with the government in 1997. Are you aware of that?'

I was, I had heard of it a long time ago. 'Let us go back a few years,' I continued. 'What was the reason behind the split in NSCN?'

'NSCN's goal was independence of the Naga region in India and Myanmar. Muivah, who was the general secretary, and a Naga from Manipur proposed the idea of talks with the Indian government. That was fine because people have divergent views. We got upset because of his decision to summon an emergency meeting in 1988, which we were not informed about. There was no representation from Konyak, Pangmi and other tribes, so we opposed this development, and there could not be any rapprochement. But the clash was started by them at Hanseng in eastern Nagaland.'

I had heard a bit about what happened later. Muivah and his wife went to Assam and stayed hidden in Margherita for months. I asked Baba about NSCN(IM) next – based on my observations it is one of the best organized and potent rebel groups in the north-east. 'Do you feel their absence?'

'They have made a huge mistake. What is certain is that they will never get sovereignty. We are certain that their demand of integrating all Nagas-inhabited areas in the north-east under a single administrative mechanism, or Greater Nagalim is next to impossible. So what is left? Very little. They will have to be satisfied with whatever scraps the government concedes.'

'But Muivah has also spoken about achieving the goals in stages. So perhaps he has something else in mind? The agreement that will be clinched with the government will undoubtedly give many things to the Nagas in the western zone. There is talk of Naga Hoho, a separate flag, a separate constitution like that in Jammu and Kashmir and so on.'

Baba drew a blank again and I signalled Joseph to repeat my question. 'Okay, okay,' Baba replied. 'As I said, they will have to climb down and ultimately what the government will acquiesce in will be very little and insignificant.'

'Looking back, what are your realizations from the movement you have been engaged with for the last six decades?'

'We have come a long way from those years when we would go from village to village explaining the reasons why the Nagas should join hands

and fight for independence. The initial years were quite tough because, as you know, there was rivalry and competition among the Naga villages. Like the others, we have had our share of ups and downs.'

'What is the future of your movement?'

'United we stand, divided we fall. We are very hopeful. Our demands are genuine and, as more and more people are realizing this, more groups are supporting us, and have agreed to a joint campaign with us,' Baba said, looking at his watch before taking a deep breath and exhaling.

I knew the time was up and Joseph indicated as much. The interview would continue the next morning, the chief informed us as he prepared to leave.

As I got up, I posed the last question to him. 'Baba, somebody told me that your government has initiated stringent measures for wildlife protection. Is that true?'

'Yes. There is a complete ban on the shooting of tigers and elephants. We have explained the importance of conservation to all the villages and they seem to have understood.'

'I wish our government had been as serious about it,' I told him as we headed for the hut where dinner was waiting for us. Instead of the usual boiled items, pork had been fried and cooked with vegetables and served with rice. After we finished, Joseph showed us to our beds in a hut adjacent to a barrack and asked us to be ready in the evening for a 'combined parade'.

'Combined parade?'

'Yes. By a joint team of NSCN(K) and some Manipuri groups, and Baba will address them. This has been arranged especially for you.'

Wow! What Baba had mentioned about like-minded groups joining hands was a reality. This would make big news back home. An hour later, I found the chief playing chess with a senior cadre from a Manipuri outfit. I drew near to watch. It was a delight watching the chief move his pieces around. He didn't like to lose and everybody who played with him knew that.

The parade ground was adjacent to the camp. It was here that the outfits assembled whenever Baba wished to address them. Today, it had been hurriedly organized, and two Manipuri groups – PREPAK (Progressive) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) – would join the Naga contingent. Pradip and I positioned ourselves at a convenient spot with our cameras. Soon it was chock-a-block with armed cadres wearing different shades of the camouflage apparel. Around 200 cadres ran around the field for their warm-ups and then lined up for the parade that began shortly afterwards. From the

dais, Baba briefly spoke about the rationale of the movement and the reasons for a joint campaign by all the organizations. He delved into history and spelt out the difference between him and the other Naga leaders, with a plea for absolute commitment. We got priceless photographs and some incredible footage.

After the parade, I had the chance to interact for a few minutes with a senior cadre of KYKL, whom I knew. He informed me that a 'United Front' of the rebel groups had already been formed and that a meeting of the top functionaries would be held in one of the camps on 30 December. I jumped with excitement. If this were true, why did ULFA not tell us? Perhaps they planned to keep it a secret. Nevertheless, there was no harm in placing a request to Paresh Baruah to take us to the venue. In the evening, when I spoke to the Naga functionaries, they confirmed the development but didn't say anything more.

Pradip pointed out that the Indian government knew of this development and the chief minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, had disclosed it to reporters some days ago at a press conference, which Pradip had seen on TV.

'But do you know the funniest part?' Pradip asked. 'This big news was revealed by the chief minister in just one line, and buried in the midst of so many less important things that nobody gauged just how significant it was.'

I was thrilled. 'That is good for us. With these photographs we would have broken the news effectively. In a way, it's true too, because we have observed these events ourselves.'

'We should ask Baruah for details and tell him that the chief minister had mentioned it.'

I agreed and reminded Pradip that it also proved beyond doubt the presence of intelligence moles in the area.

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The next morning, I resumed my session with Baba at 8 a.m. I had only about four hours with him. I explained my requirements to him and Joseph, and requested details on the important episodes of the Naga movement. It wasn't smooth. Baba started slowly, we took hourly breaks, and I often had to jog his memory. But a jagged outline had emerged by the time we wrapped up in the afternoon. There were interesting facts and perspectives that were unknown to the public. And why not? There had hardly been any research on eastern Nagaland, and very few journalists and researchers had been to this region. Whatever was known about the Nagas was entirely focused on

Nagaland – for obvious reasons – although there was an intricate link between the two provinces.

Baba took a drink of hot water and rested with his eyes closed for a few seconds. It had been a marathon session of over five hours and I was tired as well. Anyway, before long, a motorcycle arrived to take Baba to a village for a meeting.

When he returned in the evening, preparations were on in full swing at the camp for the Christmas party the following day. At midnight, the bells at the nearby church announced Lord Jesus' 2,011th birthday. A few gunshots were fired, people shouted and cheered. But things went quiet after a while and I went to sleep thinking of the Baptist missionaries who had dared to venture into these wilds more than a hundred years ago for proselytization.

The next morning, I sat next to Baruah and Moran for some time in the temporary shed that had been erected for the Christmas function. It started with a gospel choir and concluded with a brief address by Baba. The top functionaries of all the organizations were present. At an opportune moment, I broached the topic of the United Front, told him all I knew, and asked Baruah for details.

Baruah's reply made me both happy and sad. A football match celebrating the alliance had been scheduled for 30 December, which Moran had hinted to me about. Nine groups were to participate, with Baruah himself in action, at the field near the ULFA camp. A meeting of the top functionaries was supposed to precede the match, but this had been postponed for 'security reasons', and would now be held sometime next year.

'Do tell me more about the new initiative,' I requested Baruah.

'Our topmost priority now is to bring all revolutionary groups of the region fighting against India on a common platform. There are fourteen organizations in all that are with us, but we will not bring groups from Nepal, Sri Lanka and other countries because our struggle is not against those governments,' he replied.

'But why now?'

'We have seen what has happened in the past. See the Nagas. They have been fighting for so long against India but nothing has been achieved so far. The movement in Manipur had also started early, but the results have not been very encouraging. On the other hand, there were divisions in Nagaland and Manipur. We have now realized that, without unity, it may not be easy to defeat India.'

'What kind of cooperation do you expect among the groups?'

'All kinds … political, military and in many other aspects. Anything that would further our objective. Soon there will be a government in exile. There will be a constitution and a joint command as well.'

'But do you really think such an alliance can actually take off and produce desired results?'

'We are hopeful and that's why we have undertaken this endeavour. Why? Do you have doubts?' Baruah asked.

'In these fourteen groups, there are some who believe in class struggle as well … you know the groups I am referring to. There's one in particular and it is very well organized. ULFA would definitely not like to propagate class struggle in Assam simultaneously with what you call the "national liberation movement"?'

'As I have already said, we have common enemies and this will help us forge a bond and continue the campaign together. So far, no outfit has opposed the idea,' he replied as he got up to join Baba for lunch.

'Well, I suppose some kind of an alliance had always existed among the groups in eastern Nagaland. It is necessary to remain in close touch with each other here and that perhaps explains why the camps are located in close proximity. But it remains to be seen if a joint campaign would actually be possible in the north-east,' I said.

'Yes, now it will be strengthened and taken to a higher level. Wait and watch, and you will see the results.'

Some Manipuri cadres began to film the event. I looked away, trying to avoid being filmed, but then realized it was futile. Pradip, who was with me, reminded me that the footage might soon land up with the intelligence agencies. Both of us were dressed in jungle fatigues and I realized that the agencies could even make a case against us and accuse us of being ULFA activists masquerading as journalists. For the time being though, there was no point in worrying. So we put aside our worries and got busy with the food: rice with pork, buffalo, fish, dried-fish chutney and boiled vegetables.

There was a crowd waiting outside for their turn; an entire village had converged to partake of the celebrations. It was an honour for them to be invited by Baba and many were hoping to talk to him. When he emerged, with some other elderly people, he was surrounded. People grabbed his hands. They spoke to him. He said something in return that made everyone laugh heartily.

The elderly lot were Baba's ardent supporters: they were simple, knew little, asked few questions and made hardly any demands. All they knew was to contribute to and sacrifice for the cause of independence. For most of them, independence was an object that would come after years of struggle and bloodshed. It would mean total detachment from the Myanmarese army and the beginning of an era when Lord Jesus would be more compassionate and caring. For some who had some awareness about what was going on, it implied a free nation allied with the north-eastern states of India. However, for the majority, it just meant peace, prosperity and a GPRN regime that would have a firmer footing.

If Baruah was discreet and reserved, Baba was quite the opposite. He never minced words or hesitated when asked a question. Except when he had to recollect incidents that happened in the distant past, he reacted spontaneously to everything I asked him. He was available to everybody, and his followers were easily able to identify with him. Baba continued to tour the villages regularly and sometimes even went to far-off destinations in the hills using a 'helicopter' – a bamboo mat carried by four persons, somewhat like a palanquin. His deep sense of commitment had endeared him to his people, and his trustworthiness had earned him the respect of all the rebels. In short, he was something of a godfather-like figure in the region.

As I looked on at Baba and his interactions with people, I thought about his life and achievements – a life away from family, spent entirely in the jungles. It was no mean job to unify the hostile Naga tribes and put an end to headhunting, which had been a defining aspect of their culture for centuries. It must have been equally challenging to resist the Myanmarese army and make them understand the futility of continuing with their brutal campaign in Naga-inhabited areas.

Our time was running out though. We shook hands with Khaplang and his secretaries, and returned to our camp.

7

Blood, Sweat and Tears

The story of GPRN is one of a community's fight for survival against heavy odds. Tucked in a remote and almost inaccessible corner of the world, its actions escaped the attention of the media and governments that talk of human rights and liberty. In the past four decades, there have been incidents in eastern Nagaland that would have made it to the front page in most international dailies. Episodes that left a trail of death, destruction and displacement, smacking of such barbarism that it is hard to believe this is still possible in the modern era. But the Nagas' grievances went unheard, and support grew for independence as the panacea to the ills they lived with.

The British sowed the seeds of the crisis long ago when Burma was brought under colonial rule and appended as a province to India in the late nineteenth century.[1] Then, in 1937, Burma was separated for administrative convenience from India by the colonial masters. But it did not take long for the British to realize their folly, and they soon began working on a proposal to reunite the divided tribes. Assam's then governor, Robert Reid, prepared the Crown Colonial Scheme of 1941, in which he made a case for identifying the Naga and Chin-Lushai regions as separate from India because they were dissimilar in origin and outlook. His idea of creating colonial provinces struck a chord with Sir Winston Churchill who led the Conservative Party, but it could not be implemented because of the war.

After the war, the British seriously explored the possibility of implementing the scheme, that too in an expanded version which included more tribal tracts in India and Myanmar. Another reason why London increasingly began favouring an alternative arrangement was the loyalty of these tribes during the war against the Japanese. In 1945, R. Coupland, a professor from Oxford University, gave a favourable report for the creation of colonial provinces, but the Labour Party that swept to power a few months later rejected the proposal.[2] Prime Minister Clement Atlee began the process of withdrawal, and carved out Burma and India as sovereign nations without ever discussing

the matter with any Naga representative.

These changes stirred the Nagas into action in both countries. In India, the Naga National Council concluded the 'Nine Point Hydari Agreement' in 1947, just weeks before the country's independence. The agreement recognized the indisputable rights of the Nagas to develop themselves according to their will. It was Article 9 of the accord that proved controversial and the crux of the Naga political problem. The Council interpreted it to mean that the Nagas would be able to decide after ten years whether they wanted to stay with the Indian union. However, according to the government, it meant that after ten years there would be a review of the situation and a fresh agreement more widely acceptable to the Nagas would be arrived at. The disagreement raised the suspicion of the Council, and a young man named Angami Zapu Phizo began organizing a movement for seceding from the Indian Union. Nagaland's independence was declared on 14 August 1947, one day before India's, which was followed by a plebiscite in 1951 to demonstrate that the Naga were in no mood to remain with India.[3]

Among the eastern Nagas, the pace of events was slower, although an organization called the Naga National Convention had come into being under the leadership of its president Samjan Ngaimong and the secretary Simbo Sangke. According to Khaplang, it also declared the independence of eastern Nagaland on 14 August 1947, although it did not have links with Phizo's NNC in Nagaland. However, since this group had strong roots among the Tangsa Naga in Arunachal Pradesh's Changlang, the likelihood of its decisions being influenced by developments in Nagaland couldn't be ruled out. In the southern zone of eastern Nagaland, adjacent to Manipur, a group of Nagas expressed similar reservations about joining the Union of Myanmar. In 1947, a delegation led by L. Longpoh reached Yangon to present their case before the interim government, but their plea was ignored.[4]

A few weeks later, the interim government headed by General Aung Sang signed the historic Panglong Agreement with the Kachin, Shan and Chin people paving the way for the proposed Union of Burma. These ethnic minorities were granted considerable autonomy and even allowed participation in the government. A month later, another Naga delegation from Somra Tract submitted a memorandum to the government, which explicitly stated that the Naga Hills districts did not wish to be a part of the Union, and that the Nagas would agree to remain in Burma only if it was a genuine union of all the nationalities and if they were accorded the same status as the other

minorities such as the Kachin, Shan, etc.[5] The next year, General Aung was assassinated, and the Panglong Agreement was put in cold storage.

The Naga leaders wanted to mobilize all the villages and build a stronger movement, but there were hurdles that proved difficult to overcome. The east was a wild frontier in every sense. Inter-village warfare was rampant, there was no road connectivity between them and no government had been able to establish its authority over the region. Samjan and Simbo's reach was confined to the Pangmi belt, which stretched from Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh to the villages bordering Myanmar's Hukwang Valley. Likewise, the initiative from the Somra Tract could reach only a few Lainong villages in the north.[6] Barring occasional raids by the army in the villages, very little happened through the 1950s. A couple of events in Myanmar in the early 1960s, however, spurred the Nagas into decisive action. In 1962, General Ne Win staged a coup putting an end to civilian rule in Myanmar. The military banned the formation of new political parties and advocated the earlier policy of Prime Minister U. Nu of promoting Buddhism as the state religion for national integration. These developments further exasperated the Christian hill tribes who had all but given up hope that their grievances will find an ear. New insurgent outfits emerged and the existing ones braced for war against the government.

The junta also sliced off a part of the Naga homeland in Myanmar and attached it to Kachin state. The decision to create an autonomous region for the Nagas was announced, but it excluded some important townships and mineral-rich areas like Hkamti and Homalin. Simbo also died under mysterious circumstances during a visit to Kachin. The Nagas interpreted these developments as being the fallout of a conspiracy between the junta and the Kachin to grab their land and decimate them. Not unnaturally, their ties with the Kachin came under severe strain and hostilities erupted in 1963. KIA raided Namyun and a training camp at Kungkitu that had been set up by Khaplang and his associates. Senior Naga leaders went into a huddle and began the task of recruiting cadres and rejuvenating the National Defence Force (NDF), which was the armed wing of the Naga National Convention. Khaplang, who had left school just a few months prior to all this, plunged headlong into action and assumed charge of the group assigned to check KIA's advance into the Naga domain. A Naga party was soon able to ambush and kill a small group of KIA cadres; their heads were chopped off and taken back to be displayed on bamboo poles in the villages that had been most

affected.[7]

Fighting took place intermittently, but KIA was prevented from making further inroads. NDF was well organized, since the foundation of the movement had been laid more than a decade ago in the Pangmi region. The punch came from the weaponry it had amassed, which was far greater than that of KIA. A huge number of rifles and ammunition left behind by the Allied Forces and the Japanese fell into the hands of
the Nagas.

Recalling the incident, Khaplang explained, 'We formed a sort of task force to gather the weapons and ammunition that lay scattered. KIA suspected that the supply came from Phizo's NNC but they could not have been more wrong. Phizo never maintained touch with us but only sent feelers to us for the safe passage of groups that were proceeding to China for training and weapons through our territory, and we assisted them.'

The conflict was a blessing in disguise for the Nagas. The danger from KIA helped the rebels to unleash an aggressive campaign for unity among the warring tribes. For the first time, Khaplang came into contact with Naga leaders from the Somra tract in the south and leaders from Nagaland who were spearheading the movement for independence. They trekked from village to village, explaining the senselessness of headhunting and the need for harmony. The logic was simple: if the Kachin were to attack a village, immediate assistance could come only from the neighbours. NDF cadres were usually scattered and would take days to reach the troubled spot. Intimidation worked where persuasion failed. The effort began yielding dividends in the areas where the possibility of raids by the adversary was high. Soon inter-village meetings began to be held and the exercise was extended to newer villages. The historical isolation of these villages, which were 'little republics' and a world unto themselves, began to break down.

The process of change was also hastened by the spread of Christianity, which the rebels encouraged and used as a tool to carve out a common Naga identity. The cross followed the gun, and guerrillas led the way. Ironically, the first missionaries among the Nagas were from Kachin, who belonged to the Baptist Church, as they had established their presence decades ago. The priests too had to tread a fine balance – dancing to local tunes and delivering on the expectations of the revolutionaries. They were not to propagate against established customs or practices that were deep-rooted. The plea to desist from headhunting was being accepted reluctantly. Asking for more at this

stage would have been a recipe for disaster as was evident two decades later.

As the support base grew, NDF felt the need for a more vibrant political front. In 1965, the Convention was dissolved and the Eastern Naga Revolutionary Council (ENRC) formed, with V. Jopoh, a Tangkhul Naga from the Somra tract, as the chairman and Khaplang as the vice chairman. This organization ventured into uncharted territory and was able to enlist support from several tribes across a vast region. Before long, KIA began making overtures for a ceasefire, which the Nagas accepted, and an agreement for the cessation of hostilities was signed in 1968 after several rounds of negotiations. Khaplang returned triumphant from Kachin and assumed the role of chairman.[8]

For ENRC, the need of the hour was getting access to sources of arms and ammunition. East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), where its counterparts from Nagaland were being trained and equipped with arms by ISI, was an option. But it was far away and it was quite unlikely that large consignments could be shipped through the layers of security in the north-east. Then there was China, where batches from Nagaland had already been trained (in Yunnan). But reaching it would require trekking for months through Kachin, and this would not be possible without KIA's approval. Khaplang recalled that in 1968 a plan was made to send a batch of around a hundred boys from eastern Nagaland to China. They were to say they were from Nagaland, but their identity was discovered and they were turned back by KIA. It was only after the ceasefire and a subsequent accord with the Kachin in 1973 that a small group was permitted to resume that journey. In return, the Kachin had to be given some weapons and ammunition that the Nagas had brought from China.

Since the agreement worked to the advantage of both parties, another deal was firmed up within a few months between the Nagas and the Kachin to bring weapons from Thailand through the Karen region. The Kachin would provide logistical support and the Nagas would purchase and hand over a part of the consignment to them. Soon the combined team pitched tent in Chiang Mai and waited for over a month before they took possession of about a hundred M-16 rifles. Buoyed by these developments, KIA sought to rope in the Nagas in a coalition of rebel outfits against the junta that had unleashed a fierce offensive against the warring hill tribes.

In a village in the hills that we passed through, a Naga elder recalled how the Kachin proposal was debated and how the opinion of the Eastern Naga

National Council (ENNC), which came into being in 1972 after the dissolution of ENRC, finally prevailed. Khaplang, who was the vice chairman here too, echoed the view of the seniors that the objectives of KIA were different as it was fighting for a federation and not independence. The offer was turned down and a counter-proposal for a pact on defence was put in place. Although it was not signed, ties between the two sides have since remained stable barring sporadic incidents.

Meanwhile, the situation on the other side of the border in Nagaland had deteriorated with efforts at brokering peace between the government and the rebels coming to naught. The Naga National Council branded the newly created state of Nagaland in 1963 as a 'puppet state' of the Indian government. A peace process initiated a year later resulted in ceasefire between the Council and the government but it lasted only until 1972. Additional battalions of security forces were deployed and counter-insurgency operations intensified. It became imperative for the militants to secure safer hideouts and the best and most feasible option was the eastern zone. Beginning from the late 1960s, the NNC began to send teams to eastern Nagaland and succeeded in enlisting support in the Khiamniungan Naga region located south of ENNC's base area. Gradually, the support base was extended to the Lainong area, giving much-needed respite to the underground cadres.[9]

Phizo continued to guide the movement from London. His absence from the theatre of action in Nagaland did not weaken the movement. A faction branched off and came overground, but more cadres were waiting to take the plunge and fight for independence. It was not until 1975 that serious trouble began brewing for the NNC, following the decision by a section of senior functionaries to conclude the Shillong Accord with the government. The agreement, signed by five NNC representatives, unconditionally accepted the Indian Constitution and even agreed to lay down arms. Phizo did not condemn the accord, thereby inviting the ire of the radicals who were in no mood to compromise. They would accept nothing less than independence and secession from the Indian Union.

Khole Konyak, a senior functionary of the NNC, was in China with a large group when news about the pact reached him. A pall fell on the batch that had just been trained in Yunnan. In his memoirs, he writes that Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu, who were present with him in Yunnan, immediately wrote a letter to Phizo registering their protest. Isak and Muivah

were ashamed, especially with their Chinese masters around them, but they told the Naga leaders that such incidents were common in revolutionary movements. The group was assured that China would always support them in their quest for independence and that they should start anew by establishing bases in Burma.[10] They returned to Nagaland after a few months, but there was little scope for bridging the gap between those who supported the accord and those who did not. The stage was set for a round of bloody clashes.

Khaplang, who had by then become chairman of ENNC, decided to join forces with the NNC in Nagaland to strengthen the movement. His aim was to prevent more killings and the split that had become imminent. He was opposed to the Shillong Accord but did not speak his mind on the issue. After Phizo's approval, ENNC merged with the NNC and Khaplang became its president in 1979. But the task was easier said than done for him. Two senior leaders, General Secretary Thuingaleng Muivah and Vice Chairman Isak Chisi Swu, were put under house arrest by the armed wing for denouncing the accord. Khaplang made a case for their release and he found support in Khole, who had already made his stand against their internment.[11] The plan might have led to capital punishment for the duo, but, luckily for them, the army was pressured into letting them go. They were whisked hundreds of kilometres away to a remote village, where Khaplang and Khole were eagerly awaiting their arrival.

After two more months, many top functionaries exploring an alternative to the NNC were trekking to Theangpa in the Patkai Range in Myanmar, away from the prying eyes of the adversaries. After days of brainstorming, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) took birth on 31 January 1980, with the objective of securing the independence of the contiguous Naga-inhabited regions in India and Myanmar. For the first time, the eastern and western zones were brought under a single leadership, or the 'triad' as it was called, with Vice Chairman Isak Chisi Swu, his deputy Khaplang, and Thuingaleng Muivah, who was general secretary. The responsibility of the armed wing was vested upon Thungbo, who was commander-in-chief, with Khole as the vice chief. It decided to set up the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) with separate ministries each headed by a kilonser or minister.

The combination was formidable and the results encouraging. By 1985, it ran a parallel government in Nagaland and wielded considerable power in

parts of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, and was fast expanding in the eastern zone towards the south. However, a new outfit meant that a turf war with the Naga National Council was in the offing. In fact, just weeks before the new organization emerged, several NNC functionaries were killed in a raid in Hahsik in Myanmar and there was bound to be retaliation.[12] There was no time to lose and NSCN went on overdrive for funds, guns and cadres. It was futile to try and challenge the NNC in the Angami and Chakesang regions of Nagaland, as it was well entrenched there. Therefore, the clean-up operation had to be intensified in eastern Nagaland. The NSCN began to put a lethal plan into action. Before long, as Khole recalled, the villages and hideouts, which had any traces of Phizo's men, were raided and reduced to ashes.

Such large-scale massacres had never been witnessed among the Nagas earlier. Not even women and children were spared in one incident at a village in the Khiamniungan region. In another episode, news had leaked that a 300-strong NSCN force was on its way for an operation against an NNC stronghold. Three villages stood united for defence; trenches were dug, traps laid and positions taken in advance against the aggressors. Heavy toll was inflicted by both sides in the ensuing clashes, which lasted for almost a whole day. Commander-in-chief Thungbo of the NSCN, who led the assault, lay dead with a bullet in his temple. Many other senior officers were also killed. There was confusion in the ranks of the NSCN. Soon, Khole was asked to step in as head of the armed wing, rejuvenate the war machinery and launch fresh offensives against the NNC.[13]

However, Khole was hesitant to issue orders. Almost two years before Thungbo was killed, he had declared that no Konyak would take part in any operation that resulted in fratricidal killings. But the raids continued and he was unable to put an end to the carnage. NSCN also embarked on certain policies that sowed the seeds of further discord. The Myanmarese army had increased its presence in the region and had been following the policy of forcing locals to perform laborious tasks, just like in other hill states where it had a presence. Villagers would often be ordered to carry loads, arrange supplies and engage in construction work. This was particularly true of the Lainong Naga villages and they were immediately ordered by NSCN to abstain. For a while they agreed, but it gradually became impossible to turn a deaf ear to the army's increasing demands.

They knew NSCN would take revenge on them for defying the diktat, but the

Myanmarese army too would swoop down on them and commit untold atrocities for not doing what they had been told. The retaliation would mean killings and burning down the village granaries, and they would have to flee and take refuge in the hills. Moreover, they had an extra reason to be upset with NSCN. At a Pangmi village where we stayed weeks ago, an elder revealed that the NSCN had imposed heavy fines on defaulters for helping the Myanmarese army. What further enraged the Lainung Nagas were attempts to force them to embrace Christianity. Villages were ordered en masse to adopt the new religion. Wine jars were smashed and the males prevented from keeping their hair long, as was traditional. Overnight, a new cultural ambience was being imposed that was not only bizarre but repulsive to them. Finally, they decided enough was enough.

The Naga elder I spoke to explained that, towards the tail end of 1983, a delegation from Sholao village approached the Myanmarese army for assistance and was given rifles and ammunition. Their first target, a camp of NSCN at Changying, was destroyed and three cadres shot. Similar incidents took place at more places and it was time for the NSCN to retaliate. Some villages were chosen and counter-offensives launched. In some, gun battles raged through the day and in others the entire operation would be over within a few hours and the victor would return with the heads of the vanquished. It left a trail of death and destruction that impelled a section of the Konyaks in NSCN to chalk out a plan for compromise. They convinced the Lainong Nagas to declare a truce and surrender their weapons, which they reluctantly did.

The peace was shortlived. Killings went on as marauding squads went on a rampage. Konyak and Pangmi cadres were horrified at the actions of a few officers from the western zone who were hell-bent on eliminating the rebels among the Lainung. All these atrocities added fuel to a silent fire that had been raging for two years between functionaries of the two zones. Khaplang claimed that a rift had also developed following General Secretary Muivah's proposal to explore the possibility of talks with the Indian government. The eastern leaders assumed that they would not gain anything from the dialogue or an agreement with New Delhi. Above all, would it not mean deviating from the goal of sovereignty?

By 1988, the situation had reached a flashpoint. Information had been trickling in that cadres who supported Muivah would soon gather for a meeting to pass a resolution supporting talks with the Indian government. The

opposing camp headed by Khaplang knew where the talks would be held. On 30 April 1988, Konyak and Pangmi cadres owing allegiance to him surrounded a location near Hanseng where supporters of Isak and Muivah had assembled. It was early morning when the attack began, and it turned out to be one of the bloodiest days in Naga history. By noon, close to a hundred functionaries lay dead, a majority from the Muivah camp. Isak and Muivah both had narrow escapes. The latter was rescued by ULFA and kept hidden at Margherita in Assam for a few months until it was safe for him to slip out to Nagaland.[14]

Besides ULFA, the other allies of NSCN, which included PLA, UNLF and PREPAK, were in a quandary about the killings. They wanted to prevent the clash, but were unsuccessful. In the aftermath of the conflict, the groups were hesitant to take sides since it could be counterproductive in the long run. Paresh Baruah recalled that he was returning from Kachin when news about the clashes reached him. He stopped at a village ahead of Taga and was initially unable to decide what to do. Finally, ULFA joined hands with Khaplang since the base in Myanmar would be crucial to both. Baruah claimed that the decision to rescue Muivah and shift him to Assam was taken by a 'section of ULFA functionaries' without his knowledge.

Certain questions about the conflict have remained unanswered. If Isak and Muivah had been so keen to begin talks with New Delhi, what prevented them from initiating the peace process with the government immediately after the split? Government officials were of the view that Muivah's faction had sent feelers for a ceasefire only in 1996; meetings were held in foreign locations and the agreement was finally inked a year later. Senior cadres owing allegiance to Muivah rubbished Khaplang's claims that he was going to talk to the Indian government. Instead, they attributed it to a 'power struggle' in the organization soon after it was founded in 1980.

Battle lines were drawn once again and both parties began to prepare for a fresh round of offensives. Thus were born the IM (Isak–Muivah) and K (Khaplang) factions of NSCN, with each re-establishing governments in the original name: GPRN. The K group was firmly entrenched in eastern Nagaland, some pockets in the western zone among the Konyak and Sema in Nagaland and Tangsa in Arunachal Pradesh. The IM group laid the foundation of an organization that turned out to be the biggest and the best organized in the north-east. Khaplang assumed the role of chairman of NSCN(K) and became the president of the government, while Khole became

the commander-in-chief of the army. But Khaplang's worries were far from over. The Myanmarese army had increased its raids and demands on the Naga villages. They began to extract forced labour regularly for the construction of barracks required for additional deployment of troops. Checking their atrocities and launching a campaign against them would require additional resources, but at the same time, it was an excellent opportunity to regain the support and trust of the local populace and breach the alienation that the recent incidents had wrought. Once again, a campaign for unity was launched and this time it was the Myanmarese army that was propped up as the common danger. Khaplang's GPRN was careful not to repeat its earlier mistakes. Missionaries were ordered to go slow on conversion, and were warned that coercion was not to be exercised at any cost. Officers were told to show utmost deference to the village chief and elders and cultivate their support.[15]

The Konyak and Pangmi regions were the first to fall in line, since a majority of the cadres that were already enrolled in NSCN hailed from these tribes. The government was streamlined and its responsibilities divided into twenty departments, each headed by a kilonser. The fulcrum of the apparatus was the ranapiu in charge of every village, and a rajapiu above them for every three villages. An equally challenging task was to generate finances by taxing business establishments and households on both sides of the border. Cadres were recruited, trained, equipped with weapons and stationed in the vulnerable zones. Military service for three years was also made mandatory for all able-bodied males and females. Three battalions were created in addition to 'mobile task forces' as it facilitated faster movements and manoeuvres, crucial for guerrilla warfare.[16]

Khaplang's strategy was to check the advance of the IM group in the western zone in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, and launch an offensive in selected pockets against the Myanmarese army in the east. Once the group was fully equipped, it began Operation Dao early in 1991 against the army. The establishment at Lachan, where a few barracks had been erected four years ago, was the first to be raided. Khaplang told me during the interview that the offensive was 'swift and fast'. It began in the wee hours and was completed within an hour. Several army personnel were decapitated and their heads paraded in nearby villages. Success was achieved at Pengnyu three months later, where the wooden structures were completely razed, weapons and ammunition seized and only headless corpses left behind.

After these incidents, the army redoubled their efforts to provoke a few villages against NSCN but without much success. So once again, they embarked upon the 'scorched earth' policy, on the lines enunciated by General Ne Win decades ago, which meant destroying everything and killing everybody that came in their way.

The gruesome tales we heard in the villages made our blood run cold. In the Lainung region, a ranapiu narrated that there were times in the 1990s when it meant certain death were anybody to be accosted by 'Burma' (the Myanmarese army). 'He would be lucky,' he said, 'if he was shot or beheaded but they would often do barbaric things. They would rip open the stomach of the victim with a machete and pull out the intestines as much as they could.' At times, in places with high possibility of landmines, they would pick up three or four boys from the nearest village and ask them to lead the trail. The army would be at a safe distance and the boys would be blown apart if they stepped on a mine. If there were no boys to lead the trail, they would scale the hills in the middle through dense foliage and steep gradients to avoid traps.

An NSCN(K) officer named Taikhang, who had accompanied us for a day on our way from one village to another, also had astonishing stories to tell. A veteran of many an operation, he was a storehouse of information – and generous with it too. He was a Konyak Naga who had been educated at Dimapur in Nagaland. In the beginning, he was a bit wary of my inquisitiveness, because it was unusual for an ULFA functionary to ask such questions. But once he began to feel more comfortable with me, he didn't stop talking.

He spoke of a captain in the Myanmarese army who was serving his first stint in the region and making increasing demands of the locals. This captain and his men were invited to lunch at a village. A message was relayed that everything he had asked for – pigs, buffaloes, money and other items – would be arranged. It was a trap. Bamboo tables were joined up for the group to sit together for lunch. But how many would come? Thirty to forty, said some, and preparations were made accordingly. Each Burmese soldier would be served by a man who would start out by standing behind the guest. But what if around a hundred people turned up? The plan would then be abandoned and another chance taken at a more opportune time. In the end, only eighteen men turned up.

The group sat around the tables on logs that had been sculpted into

comfortable stools. Eighteen men behind them advanced with dishes, but as they got close, the plates were discarded and sharp machetes pulled out. Even before the army personnel knew what was happening, the blades came down on them and they lay dead in a pool of blood.

The entire operation lasted only a few seconds. The bodies were taken to the top of an adjacent hill and disposed of.

The army retaliated after two weeks. The village was razed to the ground, but the people had already gone into hiding in the jungles. They returned to the village after a year. It was rebuilt from scratch, and a new village emerged in three months. Thereafter, the army restrained itself from carrying out savage acts in the village.

Another story Taikhang told us was about a teenager who was deeply in love with a girl from his village. One day, his father sent him to Monyakshu, a border town in Nagaland, for some work. The total journey was supposed to take five days. Even before he reached the town, news reached him that the army had raided his village and killed several people. He dashed back only to find people preparing funerals for the dead. Among the corpses was also that of his beloved and her brother, who were shot dead along with the village chief and others for supporting NSCN(K). He remained inconsolable for weeks and finally joined the rebel outfit.

For the Myanmarese army, posting in eastern Nagaland was considered a punishment. They were poorly paid and given scant resources, but expected to produce sterling results. The situation improved after the early 1990s when more troops were stationed there, and arrangements were made for uninterrupted supply of ration and ammunition.[17] In 1989, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) collapsed, and KIA arrived at a ceasefire agreement with the junta in 1994, as did other rebel groups from different regions that had been in conflict with the army.[18] Now, attention came to be focused on the Naga region. The army's objective might have been to only establish its authority and the quickest way to do this was by demonstrating that it too had the guns to kill. It had to periodically drive home the point that eastern Nagaland was part of a sovereign nation and not independent.

Hostilities between the rebels and the army continued throughout the 1990s. NSCN stitched together an alliance called Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) in 1990 with ULFA and UNLF, and kept the door open for other like-minded groups from the north-east. IBRF's goal was independence of India's north-east and eastern Nagaland. They agreed to a joint campaign, sharing

information and access to the sources of weapons. The alliance was mutually beneficial. Groups from the north-east set up facilities where new recruits were trained. NSCN(K) derived the benefit of having additional troops at its disposal that could be utilized against the Myanmarese army whenever the need arose.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the conflict, Khaplang embarked on a difficult and challenging mission in 1997. He quietly landed in Nagaland's Mon, and thence moved on to Bangladesh through Assam and Cooch Behar. After three days, he was equipped with a Bangladeshi passport and soon landed in Geneva to present the Naga case before the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). He was back to his base at the NSCN(K) headquarters near Lahong two months later through the same route.[19]

There was hope looming on the other horizon as well. Early in 2000, Khaplang received a message from the Myanmarese army that it wanted to hold discussions on cessation of hostilities. The chief was confused. Did they actually mean it? Why would they be interested in a ceasefire all of a sudden? Whatever the reason, it was worth giving it a shot, the leadership decided, and summoned all senior functionaries from different locations to the headquarters. After two days of brainstorming, it was decided that an unwritten 'understanding', rather than a ceasefire, should be firmed up with the junta. The rationale was that a ceasefire would militate against the organization's objective of independence because the next step would then be dialogue to resolve the issues. An understanding would only result in a cessation of hostilities based on agreed norms.

Two months later, the army responded with a positive gesture and indicated that it was interested in taking the proposal forward. Subsequently, discussions resulted in the drafting of guidelines to be followed by both parties for the 'understanding' to come into vogue. Forced labour, sniping and ambushes were to be stopped forthwith; the army would be allowed to appoint a representative in every village from among the local populace after approval by the village chief and NSCN(K), but it would not visit any Naga settlement without prior intimation. None would engage in activities detrimental to the interests of the other side. This apart, as Khaplang recalled, there were other conditions that were agreed upon and duly followed by both sides. He said that the deal had been violated only once by the army when it raided a camp the very next year following pressure from New Delhi. But the damage was soon undone and relations only improved

further.[20]

The pact explains the junta's reluctance to act against the rebels in spite of New Delhi's repeated injunctions. There were numerous instances when rebel camps were shelled and destroyed, but they were rebuilt quickly, indicating that the destruction of these camps was just a charade. Indian government officials claimed that the Myanmarese army had shown them video footage of the raids and bombings of a few of these camps some years ago.

But what is it that impelled the junta to cease hostilities against the Nagas?

Myanmar had been in a state of constant civil war since its independence in 1948. More than twenty ceasefire agreements were concluded with rebel groups since 1989, though a written accord was signed only with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of KIA. There was a considerable reduction in the number of clashes, but the junta failed to take the agreements to their logical conclusions. A specific road map was missing and the goal seemed to have been to somehow maintain the status quo rather than negotiate a settlement. The outbreak of hostilities in Kachin bears ample testimony to the fact that the peace had been fragile. Trust between the rebel organizations and the army, so essential for resolution of conflicts, was in deep deficit and could not be overcome. It seemed that, in the prevailing circumstances, the army preferred not to open another hostile front with the Nagas. Furthermore, waging war in eastern Nagaland would be more difficult because it would require marshalling enormous resources in a region that lacked roads and other vital infrastructure. In addition, campaigns against the Nagas could push them closer to the Kachin, and a pact between the rebels would prove fatal for the army.

Unrest in eastern Nagaland could invite other dangers as well for a country that had embarked upon political reforms and had begun opening up to the world after decades of isolation. Myanmar's history is replete with instances of rebel groups being assisted by its neighbours. China had supported the CPB for many years, which had posed a serious threat to the government during the 1970s.[21] Beijing's objective could have been to install a puppet regime in Myanmar and fulfil its economic and strategic objectives. Assistance to the group ended in the late 1980s after China reversed its policy and began supporting the military regime.

Myanmar would also be cautious when dealing with New Delhi. The Indian government's earlier policies had rattled the junta, especially when it

supported Aung Sang Suu Kyi and the movement for democracy in the early stages. The R&AW, India's external intelligence agency, had also helped KIA and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA) with weapons.[22] However, like the Chinese, the Indian government saw greater wisdom in befriending the military, which led to changed policies from the mid-1990s onwards. The junta, however, remained unhappy and sought an opportunity to deliver a warning to India. People in the Longva village and NSCN(K) rebels claim that, on 26 October 2000, five persons from the Assam Rifles were apprehended by the Myanmarese army near the border, taken into the jungles and shot at point-blank range. Their dead bodies were returned to India, and the junta explained away the incident as a case of mistaken identity. There were news reports as well saying that the personnel were killed after the Myanmarese army mistook them for rebels of NSCN(K).[23]

Peace with the Nagas, on the other hand, would result in a wide range of benefits for the junta. It was aware that, like Kachin and Arakan, eastern Nagaland was rich in natural resources and minerals and could be a potential source of income in the future. Many parties were engaged in gold mining at locations not very far from the camps where we stayed, and some were reportedly sponsored by the army.

Trying to explain the logic behind the Burmese government's decision to arrive at an agreement with the rebels, a senior NSCN(K) functionary suggested that the government just did not have the resources to keep tabs on the porous Indo-Myanmar border. 'In such a situation, befriending us has given them great benefits. All the rebel groups here would be the best self-defence against the Indian army if it were to indulge in any misadventure and step into this region.' He reiterated Khaplang's claim that the Indian army had crossed the border on several occasions in pursuit of insurgents decades ago.

After the understanding with the junta, NSCN(K) worked out a similar agreement with the Indian government in 2001. There had been sporadic clashes between the IM and K factions since the split in 1988. Both sides suffered casualties, but since IM was a bigger and better-organized outfit in Nagaland and the other states, the Khaplang faction suffered greater losses. In 1999, the general secretary of NSCN(K), Dally Mungro, was shot dead in Kohima and as many as seventy cadres from both sides were killed in a fierce battle that raged for almost two days in Mon. The situation had become more difficult for Khaplang after NSCN(IM) came overground in 1997

following a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government. 'We were increasingly being targeted,' claimed Khaplang, 'and very often by a combined force of the IM group and the Assam Rifles.' Movement of the cadres was curtailed and their collection of taxes, which ran into huge amounts every year was hampered. The Indian government had sent feelers to Khaplang for a ceasefire earlier, but they had been turned down on the grounds that the organization's goal was independence and an agreement similar to the one inked by the IM group would be of no consequence.

Khaplang realized that it would not be possible to work out an unwritten agreement with the Indian government that would hold for an indefinite period. So a middle path was chosen: the group accepted ceasefire but abstained from talks. The agreement came into effect in Nagaland. In the other states, such as Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, the agreement was 'informal' but advantageous because the cadres could move freely as the security forces held back their operations. Every year, a delegation would reach New Delhi, parley with the mandarins in the home ministry and issue a press statement confirming the extension of the ceasefire. The system worked well for a few years. The government too did not want to antagonize the IM group, with whom dialogue was on for a negotiated settlement of the conflict in the Naga-inhabited areas of the north-east.

But Khaplang's strategy ruffled the feathers of the other top functionaries of NSCN(K), especially those based in Nagaland. They were not seen to be doing anything for furthering peace and resolving the decades-old issues. Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then prime minister of India, and senior political leaders in New Delhi met with Isak and Muivah in early 2003 for a discussion on their charter of demands. Hype was created that an agreement would soon be clinched. The duo also fervently made a case for Greater Nagalim, which envisaged bringing all Naga-inhabited regions in the north-east under a single administrative banner. NSCN(IM)'s stocks soared and its opponents almost receded into the background. Led by Khaplang's GPRN prime minister N. Kitovi Zhimomi, a powerful clique that opposed the status quo espoused by Khaplang took shape. Kitovi was based in Nagaland and had the support of his Sema community. Soon, the venerable Khole came to Zhimomi's camp at Khehoi, and that galvanized the group to pass a resolution on 7 June 2011 expelling Khaplang from the post of chairman. The trigger for this development was Khaplang's decision to remove Khole as commander-in-chief for 'anti-party activities'. The new group said it had been demanding

a National Assembly for years, and alleged that Khaplang was opposed to 'reconciliation', which meant building bridges between the various rebel groups for unity among the Nagas. They decided to adopt a different path, work for harmony and resolve all issues with the Indian government along the same lines as NSCN(IM). Khole accepted the offer to head the organization as its new president.

What was Khaplang's reaction? He claimed he knew months in advance that something was being hatched. 'Khole started going to Delhi and drawing close to Kitovi. And that was the beginning of the end,' he pointed out as he tried to recall the main events of the past four decades.

I could not quite understand what he meant and requested him to explain.

He replied, 'Going to New Delhi meant he was being co-opted by India's intelligence agencies. He established a rapport with Kitovi, who was never serious about our campaign and movement. This is a lethal cocktail. The consequences were bound to follow sooner than later. Is it clear to you now?'

Indeed it was. I began to connect the dots. There appeared to have been many reasons that widened the gulf among the top leaders. NSCN(K) was divided vertically, although a majority of senior commanders and functionaries opted in favour of Khaplang. NSCN was now divided into three factions – with a group identifying itself as 'unification', or NSCN(U), also emerging from NSCN(IM) in 2008. It later joined hands with Kitovi, which Khaplang disapproved of.[24]

At the root of the crisis in NSCN(K) was the difficult task of hammering out a common minimum programme for the eastern and western zones. It had failed earlier and it was bound to fail again, because the social, economic and political conditions were vastly different in the two zones. This necessitated dissimilar approaches, strategies and reactions for the survival and attainment of their goals. Khaplang could afford not to engage in dialogue with the Myanmarese government and continued with an informal understanding because it suited the interests of both parties. Circumstances had also enabled him to strengthen ties with other rebel outfits. However, avoiding talks with the government in India would always be perilous for the rebel outfit. People were wary of militancy in the Naga areas in the north-east, and desperately yearned for peace after decades of a bloody conflict that had claimed thousands of lives.

Khaplang said that he was never opposed to unity among the Naga tribes.

‘Those who have been levelling baseless allegations against me should recall my role in the late 1970s after the Shillong Accord. You can have a look at the major incidents and see for yourself who had indulged in senseless killings. I have never been opposed to reconciliation of any sort, but it should not serve the interests of any particular individual or group.’ He was emphatic about the fact that there was no logic in participating in these meetings when one group continued to be belligerent and bent upon wiping out the other. He was referring to NSCN(IM) and its aggressive policies towards other groups.

After Khole and Kitovi walked out, Khaplang’s hold over areas in Nagaland lessened somewhat, though not to the extent anticipated. He continued to wield considerable power in Mon in Nagaland, Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh and in a few pockets in the hill districts of Manipur. Clashes had erupted between these factions and there were many casualties as well. Many village chiefs, who had earlier supported NSCN(K), resolved not to be drawn into the conflict. They continued to maintain cordial relations and cooperated with both sides. Their counterparts on the other side of the border, however, became more vocal in their support of Khaplang.

Khaplang’s support base has remained intact in eastern Nagaland but he was never able to extend it to the southern zone – opposite Manipur – where political developments took place at a fast pace. This region had a greater presence of the Myanmarese army, better infrastructure and communication, and the population had a sprinkling from other communities such as Shan, Chin and Myanmarese. Not unnaturally, political reforms, elections and whatever else Naypyidaw (the new Myanmarese capital) planned affected this region more than the north where NSCN(K) held sway.

The chief had decided to remain detached from the elections because it would have meant compromising on sovereignty.

After Ne Win’s coup in 1962, elders from the Somra Tract and other townships began the process of floating a political front for forging unity and safeguarding the rights of the Nagas. As the junta had banned the formation of political parties, the task was perilous. It was only ten years later that the Naga Cultural Centre Committee (NCCC) could be formed with representation from many tribes. The southern zone was roused into action after Suu Kyi launched her movement for democracy. A loosely formed network called Youth Association also came into being and organized protests in almost all townships in the region. A year later, it transformed

itself into the Naga Hills Regional Development Party (NHRDP), which happened to be the first and only political platform so far among the Nagas in eastern Nagaland.[25]

NHRDP nominated five candidates for the Myanmarese elections held in 1990. Only two were declared elected from Layshi and Lahe, while the rest were disqualified on silly pretexts. But even the elected candidates were disallowed from participating in the National Convention held at Yangon in 1994 – for drafting a constitution – on the pretext that they had links with underground outfits. Protests erupted in the townships and the junta retaliated at the convention by dismissing the influential leaders and replacing them with handpicked candidates. NCCC's constitution was redrafted at gunpoint. It barred all kinds of political activities and association with members from other ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, in a stratagem to strengthen its hold over the region, the military came up with a proposal to create a 'Naga Self Administrative Zone'. As was to be expected, the scheme excluded the townships of Hkamti, Homalin, Tamu and Kampat in eastern Nagaland because they were rich in mineral deposits. Naga organizations submitted memoranda to the junta registering their protest over the plan to divide the Naga homeland again. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the military from going all out to extract and plunder the natural resources of the region, especially in the southern zone, where forced recruitment of teenagers in the army and desecration of churches were also reported.

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With Khaplang's interview over, it was finally time to prepare for the return journey. After reaching the ULFA camp, Pradip and I finalized the list of things we needed, including glucose, Electral, kneepads, anti-insect spray, green tea, tinned fish, medicines and much else. We handed the long list to Moran, who urged us not to be impatient. The people who would escort us had not yet been identified, he said, but dropped hints that it would be a different team and likely to be led by a senior officer who could speak the local language.

So we had at least a week before our departure, I estimated. 'Now only one event remains to be covered. The football match on 30 December, but it's sad that the meeting of the United Front has been cancelled,' I told Pradip.

'Yes, but let us be satisfied with whatever we have,' he replied.

Indeed. We had enough to churn out news stories for at least two weeks.

The next morning, Bijoy woke us up with a pleasant surprise. 'Please talk to your family members but don't say anything about where you are and about the return journey,' he said, showing us the satellite phone and asking us to come out of the hut.

First Pradip spoke to his wife and a close friend. His worries at once seemed to disappear. He gave instructions that were to be followed in his absence and then passed me the handset. My family members were overjoyed to hear my voice after more than two months. I laughed, cracked jokes and convinced them that I was in fine fettle. I was informed that our newspaper – *Seven Sisters Post* – had been launched, but on 11 November and not on 31 October as planned. That was also the day when we narrowly escaped an accident while crossing the river on the rickety raft. An ominous portent?

The next four days were spent following the usual routine. I took out more time for daily exercises, climbing up and going down the stairs and mounds at the same pace as the cadres. I also listened to certain portions of Baba's interview on tape, jotted a few questions that I needed to clarify with Baruah. I realized that Baba's account had been brief and concise, without the humorous anecdotes that Baruah provided. His memory was fading and we only had an outline of the crucial episodes, especially the early phase leading to his discontinuance from school and conflict with the Kachin. It was a fallout, I presumed, of the harsh life lived over so many years in the remorseless jungle terrain.

On 29 December, we were told that the football match would commence at 2 p.m. the next day. There would be only nine players on each side, because the venue was small. ULFA, NDFB and NSCN(K) members would make up one team and face the combined squad of the seven Manipuri groups. Preparations began in the afternoon, with Baruah, Bijoy and an NDFB cadre drawing up the team list. A long discussion followed until the evening, when they carried out their training session.

Interestingly, the Manipuris had already prepared the ground for the alliance of the rebel outfits. Efforts at forming an association had begun more than two years ago after the nod from Khaplang. In mid-2010, these seven groups stitched a coalition among themselves, called the Coordination Committee (Cor Comm), which promised to assist each other and engage in a joint campaign for the independence of Manipur. This initiative was the fourth attempt by rebel groups from the north-east to firm up an alliance. The

first had come as early as in 1986 in eastern Nagaland, when NSCN, UNLF and ULFA came together to form the United Front. It resolved to assist each other and even send a combined team to China. Hopes were dashed after NSCN's split two years later into the Khaplang and Isak–Muivah factions. ULFA and UNLF remained with Khaplang and the alliance was renamed as Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF). NSCN(IM) joined hands with NDFB and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) to form the Self Defence United Front of South East Asian Himalayan Region (UFSEAHR), but it collapsed after the Naga group signed a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in 1997.

NSCN(IM)'s vociferous campaign for Greater Nagalim had alarmed the Manipuri groups. Their state would suffer the worst were the government to accept the demand. Manipur could lose as many as four hill districts out of a total of five that are inhabited by Naga tribes. PLA supported UNLF's proposal of an association between all rebel groups in Imphal Valley, and thus was formed the Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF) in 1999. PREPAK joined as a member of the front but failed to fully participate due to internal strife. The forum also failed to engage the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and the factions of the Kangleipak Communist
Party (KCP).

A better opportunity presented itself after Khaplang's entente cordiale with the junta in Myanmar. Raids and bombings by the army ceased and NSCN(K) permitted more cadres to be based in eastern Nagaland. The formation of the Cor Comm in 2010 paved the way for implementing a plan to bring other north-eastern outfits under an umbrella group. Khaplang gave his consent, and Baruah too swung into action to enrol more groups. By mid-2011, as many as fourteen outfits from the north-east had decided to join hands. Only Mizoram, where militancy had drawn to a close long ago – after the Mizo National Front (MNF) came overground in 1986 – remained unrepresented among the states. There was hope of a new organization being formed in Arunachal Pradesh, and there were positive indications from Garo National Liberation Front (GNLF) in Meghalaya, All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the Biswamohan faction of National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).

After a meeting held five months later, it was decided that top functionaries from all these groups would converge at a convenient location in eastern Nagaland on 30 December for the final meeting to be followed by a football match, and a press release declaring the formation of the front would be

issued. Nevertheless, it remained to be seen if the front would actually be able to make a difference in Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, where militancy was on the wane except in a few pockets. In Arunachal Pradesh, a group called Arunachal Dragon Force had emerged sometime in the mid-1990s and it had even established contact with ULFA and NSCN(K). However, it fizzled out after a few arrests and operations by the police.

On 30 December then, we positioned ourselves on a raised earthen platform that provided a good view of the field. A small crowd had gathered from the nearby village, as they usually did whenever friendly matches were played between rebel groups once or twice a year on occasions like Raising Day. Obviously, they were not used to seeing people from nine groups playing together wearing colourful jerseys and with a referee in place. At 2.45 p.m., the players lined up on the field and shook hands with each other. Baruah, dressed in red shorts and a yellow cardigan, led the combined ULFA-NDFB-NSCN(K) team and a slim, middle-aged officer from UNLF was the captain of the other team.

The referee blew the whistle minutes after Khaplang took a seat with Moran in a shed nearby. There was little scope for dribbling the ball for too long or for sending out long passes in that small field. The Manipuris understood this early; they relied on short passes and were in attack mode from the very beginning. By half-time, they were leading 3-0. Baruah shifted from centre forward to goalkeeper and put in a few dives to prevent goals as well. He roared instructions to his teammates but was unable to prevent the opposite side from further improving their score. The final tally was 4-2 in favour of the Manipuris.

I took more than thirty photographs of the match, but only eight turned out to be of decent quality. Match quality notwithstanding, it kept the spectators riveted until the end. The ball frequently went outside the field, and at times vanished into the surrounding jungle, wasting time and breaking the tempo of the game. Two among the Manipuris stood out for their skills. One, perhaps from UNLF, was the star attraction and undoubtedly deserved the Man of the Match award. He scored twice, once by a terrific header in the first half. Baruah, who happened to be the senior-most player, was also impressive, working hard to turn the tide. However, his reflexes had gone slow, in spite of his considerable energy and enthusiasm.

After the game, the players shook hands and went home having scripted an important event in the annals of the north-east insurgency. The comradeship

of the rebel groups had inched one step closer.

The alliance of the rebel groups has come at a time when Myanmar is passing through a crucial phase of transition. It also coincides with the fierce rivalry unfolding among the USA, China and India for a greater role in that country. So, was this development simply an outcome of a tactical move by the rebels, or was it related to the geopolitics in the region? During the past few decades, with Myanmar focused on domestic issues and secluded from the West, and India distracted by internal matters, China had gained a strong foothold in the region. By 1990, Myanmar had become China's crucial political and military ally in South-East Asia. Recently, however, Myanmar has sought to break out of its international isolation and reduce its dependence on China. It had drawn closer to India and, on 1 December 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar, the first visit by a high-ranking US official in decades. The European Union suspended sanctions against the country close on the heels of an announcement by the US that it would consider doing the same. China was clearly troubled by these developments, as it couldn't afford to loosen its grip over the country due to its vital economic and strategic interests.

Actually, China has a multi-pronged agenda in Myanmar. It has been planning to build a pipeline through Burma to avoid the volatile Strait of Malacca to facilitate its oil imports from the Middle East. For this, and for importing oil and gas from the fields in the sea south of Myanmar, China had reached an agreement with Myanmar in 2009. That aside, China wanted direct access to the Bay of Bengal in order to dominate that area strategically. If it gained entry into this route, it could also derive advantages in the greater Indian Ocean region. This would add to the strategic advantage China wanted from the 'String of Pearls' plan, which entailed creating military and commercial facilities stretching from the Middle East to Myanmar.[26] In addition, Myanmar could also be used by China to gain access to ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) for promotion of its trade and strategic influence, quite similar to what India has sought to achieve through its 'Look East Policy'.

Government policies apart, Beijing is also anxious about the domestic situation in Myanmar. There have been large-scale protests against the investment and extraction of natural resources on the part of Chinese companies. In Kachin, agitation against the Myitsone dam on the River Irrawaddy forced the government to call off the project, as it would have

caused inundation and irreversible ecological devastation. At Monywa in Sagaing Division, locals had been campaigning against Leptadaung Copper Mines, which was owned jointly by the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, a Myanmarese military-owned conglomeration, and Wanbao, a subsidiary of Norinco, the Chinese state-owned arms manufacturer. Huge quantities of waste from the mines were dumped on land owned by farmers who had not been paid compensation.

The worsening situation in Myanmar prompted China to fall back on its earlier policy of actively assisting rebel outfits. In recent years, it has stepped up military assistance to United Wa State Army (UWSA), based in Myanmar's Shan state, along the south-western border with China. This group emerged in 1989 following the collapse of CPB after the Was, who constituted the bulk of the fighting force, revolted and decided to float their own organization. According to some reports, even air-defence systems and armoured vehicles are now being provided to UWSA by the Chinese. The purpose is to deliver a stern message to Naypyidaw that China will not tolerate its long-term interests in Myanmar being jeopardized because of reforms and the country's growing links with India and the West.[27]

China has also been maintaining close relations with some rebel outfits and leaders from the north-east. There were incidents in the past that could shed light on Beijing's actual objectives vis-à-vis these groups. When the nineteen-member squad of PLA of Manipur was being trained in Tibet in the late 1970s, their Chinese masters had instructed them, inter alia, that they should be prepared for a 'long haul' and they should form an alliance of 'like-minded organizations' in the region.[28] There was ample reason for Beijing to pin its hopes on PLA. It was losing faith in the Naga and Mizo rebels, who had earlier been trained in Yunnan. The Mizo National Front (MNF) had already indicated its willingness to enter into a dialogue with the Indian government; and the Naga National Council, which was spearheading the secessionist movement in Nagaland, was faction-ridden. The Ojas, as the PLA group came to be called, returned home and silently began to work towards laying a strong foundation for a movement and preparing a network.

Furthermore, just a week after the Shillong Accord was inked in 1975 between a faction of the NNC and the Indian government, Chinese officials held a meeting with another group of the outfit that had gone to Yunnan for training and weapons. This batch, which included senior functionaries like Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and Khole Konyak, was opposed to the

agreement and was determined to carry on with the campaign for the independence of Nagaland. The officials advised them to set up bases in eastern Nagaland just as the communists had done in China before capturing power in 1949. They cautioned that there would be joint operations by India and Myanmar to eliminate the bases, but that such incidents would only contribute towards strengthening the movement. The Nagas were assured of assistance and support and were further told to focus on cultivation.[29]

These training modules were brought to an end by China in the late 1970s following India's objections. Although Beijing promised that it would no longer assist the north-east rebels, research has revealed some astounding facts. In the early 1980s, the Chinese had utilized KIA, with which it shared good rapport, to train several batches of the PLA recruits.[30] However, since 2011, the situation in Kachin has become highly uncertain. KIA and other local organizations were upset about the Chinese investments in the region, which had ignored local demands and sentiments. Beijing too was worried that the existing situation could offer India and the US scope to secure a foothold in Kachin and a greater role in Myanmar. Therefore, it is entirely possible that China would have cultivated allies in eastern Nagaland, in much the same way that it had done in Shan state. If necessary, these groups can be utilized to fight proxy wars against governments and agencies that are inimical to Chinese interests.

Anyway, the next morning, Moran summoned us and asked us to carry our cameras. Three cadres were emptying fish of various sizes from two gunny bags in one corner of the camp. The fish had been caught with the help of local villagers from the river that we had cruised by motor boat. The biggest was a chocolate mahseer of around 5 kilograms. Some were distributed to the camps nearby and the rest were prepared for New Year's Eve dinner.

In the evening, we broached the topic of our return journey to Baruah and were glad to get a definite response from him.

'We have finalized the route you will have to take and it will be slightly changed for security reasons. You will definitely take less time than it took you to come here, but the return journey will not be disclosed to anybody now,' he said.

'So when do you think we should leave? If we know in advance, we can start preparing and gathering the necessary stuff.'

'You really seem to be desperate to return. Come on, relax and enjoy. Nothing will happen if you reach a few days later.'

‘Quite honestly, we would have loved to stay on for a bit longer, but both of us will face problems if we delay further. As for me, the paper is still a new project and my absence for a long time could be a problem,’ I said.

He replied that we would be informed as soon as the ‘green signal’ was received.

I was a bit worried because short cuts in the hills are notoriously treacherous and only rebels used them. The team would also be different and it was highly unlikely that a doctor would be part of it. I decided to take a long rope, as it would minimize the possibility of mishaps during steep ascents.

Three days later, Moran told us that they would like us to attend Bihu and, the day before that, another football match among the groups. Top functionaries from other groups, including Khaplang, were expected to grace the occasion. After Bihu. Would this mean a further delay?

Moran sensed our unease; Pradip was desperately homesick by now. Moran assured us that we would be able to depart the day after Bihu and that we would be taken through a shorter route. There was simply no way we could turn down their request. So I decided to defuse the tension in the air. I told him that he must take us on evening walks to interesting places near the camp while we were still around. He agreed.

Nonetheless, we felt relieved. We would begin the last leg of our assignment and hopefully be back home by the first week of the following month, provided there was no break in the journey and we were not forced to stay put at any location for too long. We went to a shop after a couple of days and filled our bags with essential things for the return journey, including anti-insect spray. Neither glucose nor Electral was available. What we laid our hands on was a Chinese product in sachets that combined the two elements. The skin lotion that we desperately wanted to keep the damdim away was nowhere to be found. I was concerned about those tiny vampires, as I did not want to develop the sores again. They had dried out but there were pockmarks all over my body as if I had suffered from chickenpox.

Sleeping bags were laid out in the sun, and the clothes required for the trek were washed and dried. There were new things like the jackets and green tea that we would have to carry back. I also slipped in a new pair of jungle shoes, as the ones I was wearing had frayed. With only a few days left for departure, we decided to spend more time with Baruah and Moran because it was uncertain if we would ever meet again. With the meetings over, the duo

looked relaxed and seemed to wait for us to sit with them. A casual talk invariably led to discussions on a range of subjects. I also shot off the last few remaining questions.

In between, we toured a few more places nearby, including the first village that was set up by three Naga settlers as far back as in 1982. They had descended from the hills reluctantly, but they discovered that life was easier in the valley and never went back. The trickle continued and a village of around 150 households had settled down within the next decade. They elected a headman and a council of elders to assist him in much the same way as in the hills. People from other villages in the hills were encouraged to follow suit.

We stepped into the village to find a world that was poles apart from the hill settlements. There were no half-naked toddlers staring at us, no village elder to enquire about our journey and no groups huddled in corners. But, just as the ones in the hills, all the houses had the same design – built with wood and raised on a plinth with lovely designs. The settlement wore a deserted look, with only a few pigs and fowls seen in the courtyards of some of the houses.

A window over a balcony opened and a person waved out to one of the young cadres accompanying us.

'This is the house of the famous Naga general, Baba Karang,' Moran said. 'And that man is his brother. Let's go inside.'

'Can I get his photograph?'

Moran conversed in Nagamese with him and we were invited in. A photo of the deceased general hung on the wall. I took the frame outside and clicked a few photographs of it. His brother, a smart middle-aged man, identified himself as Laima and gave us details about Baba Karang's career, which spanned more than four decades with the various organizations that had come into being from the early 1970s. He had the distinction of conducting the maximum number of raids against the Myanmarese army. He was thrice injured in the offensives and escaped narrowly during the attack on the Yongkon Company Headquarters in 1982. Later, NSCN elevated him to kilonser in recognition of his services.

I jotted down the details and then enquired about the village and its people. 'Laima, I am sure all the people here have migrated from the hills. When did you shift, and why?'

'Almost a decade ago,' he said. 'We came down because of the need for

people in this region. The government had to be established firmly.'

I asked if he meant GPRN, headed by Baba Khaplang.

'Yes. As you have seen, there's so much land here and great scope for cultivation.'

'So, are all the inhabitants of this village Pangmi Naga?'

'Yes. Although some are from different villages.'

'Have there been any raids or atrocities by the army in this region?'

'No. Not as far as I can remember.'

'That means you are at peace here. What is the source of your livelihood?'

'We are farmers and sometimes we sell the surplus produce.'

Laima's wife served us green tea and two neighbours joined us too.

'Tell me something about this village,' I asked. 'What kind of changes have the people here gone through after coming from the hills?'

'Life is easier here, but extremely hot during the summer. There is no scarcity of food and water,' said one of the men in broken Nagamese.

'And what about the other aspects? In the hills, everything revolves around the community. Is it the same here?'

'Yes. We have frequent interaction with the villages in the hills and many of our relatives are still there. Everything is still community-oriented, and there is a support system for every individual.'

I asked lots of questions for the next few minutes and their replies gave me the impression that social norms, including traditional customs and mores, had remained unchanged. The entire village would converge to help people in distress. There were many more devout Christians now and, every Sunday, the church would be packed with people. However, the dependence of individual families on the community might have lessened because this terrain made it easier to earn a livelihood. There was now a greater motivation to earn profits by selling the surplus produce to rebel camps and nearby towns.

The camp was bustling with activity when we returned late in the afternoon. There were new faces in the crowd; perhaps they were visitors from another camp. Everybody was doing something, either erecting temporary bamboo sheds or cleaning the compound. More than 300 people from the villages and camps had been invited for Bihu, which was two days later and would be jointly organized by ULFA and NDFB. Six cadres had been sent to the river to catch fish, and others were out on different errands.

The next day's football match was the same as the previous one, held in the

same location with the same combinations, except that the Manipuris were drubbed 3-1 this time. The score did not matter to them, only the bond of friendship that was growing stronger by the day. It would have a ripple effect on other locations where camps existed in close proximity to each other. In the evening, the fishing party returned with a huge catch in six gunny bags for the feast the next day. The fish were filleted immediately to prevent decay.

By 11 a.m., the camp's parade ground was teeming with visitors. Khaplang, in a black coat and red tie, arrived with a posse of bodyguards and sat beside Baruah and the NDFB chief, Songbijit. The programme was shorter than expected. A senior functionary gave a brief speech explaining what Bihu was about and thanked the guests for gracing the occasion. Next, a troupe of ULFA cadres poured in singing the husori with the clapping of the dhol. The lyrics, though, were different and lacked the conventional romantic undertone of Bihu songs. They conveyed ULFA's goal and the demand for independence:

'*Aamak swadhinata lagibo, aamak swadhinata lagibo.'* (We want independence, we want independence.)

Baruah is known for his fondness for Bihu. He joined the band and began to dance with the cadres, who were circling him in a fashion typical of the traditional dance. Somebody requested Khaplang and Songbijit to participate, which they did. The crowd was clapping and cheering. It was a rare sight to see them dance together, even if only for a few moments. A senior cadre, who stood watching, urged me to join as well, but I could not afford to miss out on the rare photo opportunity this presented.

The dance over, the chiefs returned to the shed. Baruah asked me whether I had enjoyed the show.

'Yes. But more than the show, it was Baba's performance that will grab the attention of people back home,' I replied, and applauded Khaplang and Songbijit, who were both delighted with my praise.

'I hope you managed to take some good photographs,' Khaplang said.

'Well, I hope so. I will have to check.'

'Yes, it must come out well. People in Assam should know how Bihu is celebrated here and the way we enjoy the festival. And did you like my dance?'

'Of course, Baba. I would have loved to see you on a stage in Assam.'

After the meal, as Khaplang and Songbijit were about to leave, I shook hands with them and told them that we were leaving the next day. The duo

invited me to come again.

In the evening, we sat with Baruah on the veranda of his hut.

'So, everything set?' he asked.

'Yes. And thank you once again for everything. We would like to say goodbye to everyone here. Will that be possible?'

'They are also keen to come and see you off.'

The chief set down the ground rules for our journey home. We were not to reveal our identity anywhere and start the day as early as possible to reach the farthest possible point. 'The route is tough but you will not have many problems because you have already been through it. You will see that you will cover distances in half the time you took on your way here.'

I handed him a list of questions to be emailed to Dr Avijit Barman, with a request for the answers in two weeks. I also asked about the group that would take us back. Moran said that the group had been beefed up for security reasons and would have ten cadres. There would not be a 'doctor' in the team though, and that worried me. On the bright side, an experienced officer named Pranab, who could speak the local language and had lived in eastern Nagaland since the early 1990s, would lead the team.

The day had been tiring, and I retired early on my last night at the camp. Our hard labour had been well rewarded. Many things that were in the realm of speculation – about ULFA, Baruah and Khaplang – had been clarified and verified; some were true and others not. I regretted not bringing a video camera because the footage would have made for a fabulous documentary.

The next day, we had a brunch of pork and rice, finished our last-minute packing, and were ready to leave by 10 a.m. Pranab came up to us with the team members – they would come with us and carry our backpacks until we reached the first village.

'Pranab, how many days do you think it will take us to reach home?'

'It all depends on your speed and the situation, which will be assessed continuously. If the shorter routes are blocked, well, it could take over a month.'

Fingers crossed! 'What about today?'

'We should reach the village before sunset if you walk fast,' he replied.

I cast a final glance over the place from the hillock, at our hut and the jungle behind. We thought we would only spend a fortnight here, but ended up staying for fifty-three days. Baruah and Moran embraced us and then accompanied us to the gate, where the cadres had assembled to bid us adieu.

It was an emotional moment. Everybody had been so caring and courteous. Our visit had been quite a novelty for them. They were not used to being with journalists or seeing their chief giving interviews. Chances were that we would never see them again. Guerrillas live an uncertain life. They knew that. That's why they were in eastern Nagaland.

Pradip and I shook hands with everybody, wished them good luck and then stepped out of the camp with the cadres in front of and behind us. I looked back, waved once more, and began the march into the final part of the assignment.

Soon, we would surface in Assam, bury all speculation about our detention by the Myanmarese army and confinement by Khaplang.

8

Missing in Action

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There had been a sharp knock on the door of our hut at night eleven days after our arrival in the camp. Both Pradip and I leapt out of bed. It was Bijoy. He appeared excited. What he said struck us like a bolt.

'Did you tell anybody that you were coming to eastern Nagaland?'

'No, not about meeting the chief of staff,' I replied. But since I would be away for some time, I did tell some people in my office, including the editor-in-chief of my newspaper, that I was going to interview Khaplang.

'There has been a leak and the TV channels in Guwahati are flashing news that a journalist has been apprehended by Myanmarese army along with senior ULFA leader Jibon Moran.'

'Goodness! What will happen now?'

'Stay cool. Nothing will happen. We are used to all these shenanigans and we will get to the bottom of this incident,' Bijoy said calmly, adding that Baruah had spoken to him on the telephone a few minutes ago and instructed him to find out if we had told anybody about the journey.

I was speechless for a few seconds and stared at Bijoy's face in the dark. 'But who might have done it? It is absolutely false.'

'Whoever has done it does not want you to meet our chief. That much is clear,' he replied. 'I am quite certain about one thing: Sir (Baruah) is all the more determined to meet you and you will be able to take his interview.'

I could hardly sleep and woke up early the next morning. I switched on the TV to catch the latest. The programme that discussed newspaper headlines revealed that the story about us was on the front page of most vernacular dailies, with some even carrying a photograph picked up from my Facebook account. There were sufficient hints that a news channel had broken the story the evening before, which was subsequently followed up by the others. To make matters worse, the Union home secretary, R.K. Singh, confirmed the incident to reporters at North Block in New Delhi in the afternoon.

But, in a curious U-turn, the channel that had broken the news later

announced that it was false and that nothing of the sort had happened.

I tried connecting the dots for an answer but nothing seemed to add up. Something had gone wrong somewhere. Somebody knew about our assignment and whoever invented these stories definitely had an ulterior motive. Baruah had repeatedly reminded us to keep the mission under wraps as it could jeopardize not only our security but also that of the entire camp.

We asked Moran to let us call home using the satellite phone, but he told us not to. The reason was quite sensible: to prevent security agencies from using the call to trace our location. They would have surmised that Baruah would also be headed for the same place. He assured us that he would send information that we were safe to our homes.

We were glued to the TV for the next few days. It was hilarious to see the local media run amok with speculation about our assignment. And why not? The story had been authenticated by none other than the home secretary. He wouldn't have done that without inputs from the intelligence agencies. The channels began to dig for more information and soon found out that Pradip was accompanying me. However, they were not certain whether we had come of our own volition or had been invited by Baruah. Our family members had to give in to the constant hounding by reporters. They said they knew nothing about our whereabouts.

Every evening, Pradip and I discussed the matter threadbare. I concluded that after the information had been leaked, someone in the establishment had begun feeding the media with misinformation. They could not be seen to know nothing. R.K. Singh's confirmation proved that their initial information was erroneous. It was a potboiler, to say the least, and our attitude changed from concern to amusement once again. We sat back, relaxed and enjoyed the fun.

Two days later came the news that the Myanmarese army had released the two journalists after seizing their cameras and other equipment. The duo had apparently been apprehended somewhere along the Sino-Myanmar frontier and then brought to a location close to Manipur. It was here that we were supposedly interrogated, perhaps even tortured, and interned for a while. As the day drew to a close, some channels said that we were to be handed over at the border town of Moreh in Manipur to Assam Rifles. Nothing was known about Moran, who was reportedly with us. A couple of days later, news reports flashed again that nobody turned up at Moreh and we were still missing. The Guwahati Press Club dashed off a letter to Prime Minister

Manmohan Singh as well, seeking his help in ensuring our safe return.

Meanwhile, the thirty-minute programmes on TV too began to focus on our 'disappearance'. In one of them, a reporter well known for her investigative skills, expressed surprise about the leak. Another from a local daily said that information about our journey had reached the Guwahati Press Club a long time ago, shortly after we had left. With nothing more being heard about us, the topic petered out. The world knew about our journey, but at least it was no longer on TV or in the newspapers. We were relieved, until Moran informed us that we ought not to go outside the camp for a few days for security reasons. It made sense, I thought, because our faces had been shown repeatedly on TV. To pass the time, we dribbled a football in the evenings or watched the cadres play volleyball.

But two days later, we were woken up by a young cadre who asked us to watch the news. And there was yet another bombshell. This time, we had supposedly been interned by Khaplang. And he was demanding a whopping Rs 5 crore for our release. Between bouts of studied silence, gravity and jocularity, I wondered whether I was worth that much money. At any rate, nobody knew if the money would actually be paid to the rebel chief. Was the ULFA negotiating for our release? Yes, said somebody. No, added another, there was no question of ULFA paying money to Khaplang since he was close to Baruah. Quoting reliable sources, a prominent journalist said on TV that we had been spotted having breakfast at Khaplang's camp. So the news story was false. We were alive and free. What next?

It was time to get somebody to reveal where we actually were. In came Kugalu Mulatanu, publicity secretary of NSCN(K), based in Nagaland. He spoke to a news channel over the telephone and said the two journalists were 'safe and sound' in the 'Eastern Zone' and criticized the media for the false reports.

Amid the chaos came the good news that Baruah was expected soon. We were relieved that the channels finally seemed to have gone silent and we would not have to suffer the embarrassment of explaining the entire fiasco to the chief. I silently cursed myself for having failed to ensure the total secrecy that he had insisted upon.

A week after the chief arrived, a story was trumped up again by the New Delhi–based reporter of a local daily, who spoke to a channel and quoted Home Minister P. Chidambaram as saying that there was no information about our whereabouts. The Assam chief minister, Tarun Gogoi, contradicted

this statement when he explained in a press conference that there were reports that we were safe wherever we were.

Contrary to our misgivings, Baruah did not appear perturbed about the incident, although he maintained that secrecy was a precondition for the success of our assignment. We understood. New Delhi was frustrated with Naypyidaw's reluctance to eliminate these camps. Baruah was one of India's most wanted men, and if his presence at a specific location could be established, it would be easier to convince the Myanmarese army to mount an operation. However, the possibility of successful raids by the army was bleak for the time being.

But such stories are intended to create a certain fear. Communication between the top rung and lower cadres in the field was not always regular. Fictitious news stories created confusion and sometimes motivated functionaries to lay down arms before the government. Counter-insurgency is a war of information as much as a physical war with guns and bullets. What's more, a tainted image of the outfit's leadership could prevent newcomers from enlisting. Colossal sums are earmarked each year to all the agencies for such purposes.

Moran and Bijoy advised us not to take the controversy too seriously and cited earlier instances of such incidents. In 2008, there were reports that Baruah was taken seriously ill at a PLA camp in Myanmar. He was reportedly at death's door and had even contacted the Indian intelligence for evacuation by helicopter. A few days later, the chief sent a press release saying he was neither sick nor at the camp. In the past decade or so, there had been regular stories in the media about ULFA camps being destroyed, internal strife, and their leaders being apprehended. Even the BBC had erred many a time when it came to reporting on insurgency in the north-east. On 19 December 2003, it had reported that ULFA founder, Bhimkanta Buragohain, had been killed in an offensive launched by the Royal Bhutan Army. Two weeks later, there was another story quoting the ULFA founder saying that he had been tortured after being apprehended.[1] Buragohain actually passed away many years later in Assam after being released from jail. It is very difficult to verify the truth at times. Intelligence agencies cultivate reporters who will report whatever information is fed to them.

Pradip and I stopped appearing on TV although the focus on ULFA remained. With an 'exclusive' tag, a channel said ULFA had adopted a new constitution ever since the central executive committee had been

reconstituted. Not to be deterred, its rival news channel showed a map of all rebel camps at Taga in eastern Nagaland. I knew the place well and nothing could have been further from the truth. Would we not have known if a new constitution had been adopted? Furthermore, we would have known if ULFA and NSCN(K) had been actively collaborating with the CPI(Maoist) like the PLA was doing. A story was shown the entire day on a channel saying that a thirty-member squad under the leadership of Aditya Bora had crossed over to Myanmar after being invited by these outfits. This was simply not true.

After the controversy subsided, we were allowed to speak to members of our family. I requested Baruah's permission to make a few more phone calls from the satellite phone, He readily agreed on the condition that our location would not be disclosed.

I could not resist the temptation of finding out the source of the leak. It was hardly a riddle. I spoke to four persons, including a friend in New Delhi, who were unanimous about the source: the very newspaper I worked for!

The first disclosure, said my friends, was in the editorial of the inaugural issue of the daily on 11 November 2011, which was headlined 'Paresh Baruah's Mock Fight'. It said that a senior editor of the newspaper had left on an assignment to reach ULFA's hideout in Myanmar's jungles. My name was not mentioned, but that was hardly necessary, given that I was the only one who had been missing from the office for a month. Then came another editorial on 16 December 2011, captioned 'Media Woes', which also carried the signature of editor-in-chief Subir Bhaumik. He did not have any qualms about revealing my name or my assignment, and did so sixteen times while also lambasting the media and journalists for wrong reportage on the episode. Bhaumik has decades of experience as a journalist, including a long stint with the BBC as the East India Correspondent. Did he not know that his column could have landed Pradip and me in serious trouble? The Myanmarese government has not permitted any journalist to visit these conflict zones so far. What could have propelled Bhaumik to reveal details about my assignment?

I did not have the nerve to talk about my discovery with anybody, not even Pradip. My colleague in New Delhi informed me that a few journalists, including Kalyan Barooah, Nishith Dholabhai and M.M. Jha, had put in serious efforts to trace our whereabouts. Member of Parliament from Assam, Ramen Deka, had even called on then home minister, P. Chidambaram, and impressed upon him the need to get in touch with his Myanmarese counterpart

for information about our whereabouts. He did and was informed by Naypyidaw that it was completely unaware about our presence in the country. The Indian embassy in Myanmar had also been sent a missive from the Ministry of External Affairs to investigate. Subsequently, a senior official from the embassy called my father to ascertain my location in Myanmar. My father was astonished because he was expecting information from them. The intelligence agencies were on overdrive to derive accurate information after their fiasco. There was utter confusion. I imagine that the conspirators who leaked the story too had begun to guess that we were safe.

At any rate, our cover had been blown and everybody in the camp knew we were journalists. They had mistaken us for senior functionaries who stayed in Assam and hopped abroad for organizational work. There was a subtle change in the attitude of the cadres towards us, even if we were treated with the same deference as earlier. Whenever the seniors were not around, the youngsters posed more questions to us on the current situation. They were keen to know our views on the scenario in the country and the north-east, the likely solutions to the myriad problems and the role that ULFA could play. A handful was eager to figure out if independence would be a reality and whether the time had come for their 'final victory'. We had to tread a cautious path with balanced answers. Nevertheless, I had no reservations about depicting the true picture in Assam, the illegal immigration, flood, erosion, deforestation, corruption and the government's total indifference to these burning issues.

Days passed and Baruah finally decided to begin the interview. However, some exciting trips had been cancelled, and we lost an opportunity where we would have surely been able to gather more information about the region and take back some interesting news stories. We were supposed to have gone to a spot where many fighter aircraft had crashed during the Second World War and then to another historic location, which was a two-day walk from the camp. We were upset. But our hosts would not take any chances with our security, the chief explained. We could be on our own only after we had reached Nagaland.

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Our trekking speed was surprisingly good as we marched through plains and forests and retraced our steps on the route that had brought us to this camp. Dressed in jungle fatigue, we became indistinguishable from the ten others accompanying us. The only difference was that we were not carrying

weapons, and my hat was different from the rest, which marked me out. It was a felt hat in camouflage taken in exchange for a gift from a Chinese official at an event in Arunachal Pradesh's Bumla some years ago. As such, we were enjoying every bit of our trek. And, of course, we were going home.

We were headed to the riverbank where we would put up for the night before sailing upstream in motor boats. After three hours, the route veered in a northerly direction. A village and the river beyond came into view as the setting sun cast an idyllic tinge to the landscape. We were shown a neat bamboo hut built in the typical Pangmi style. I went down for a glimpse of the river where the three motor boats were anchored. The rippling green water surface from a few weeks ago had vanished; the waterline had dipped, and the river bed was now clearly visible. I wondered just how effective the motor pedal propulsion would be in the shallow water. The boatmen, who were all ULFA cadres in their late twenties, cooked dinner. As a grand finale to a rather satisfying day, it was rice, pork and bamboo shoot again, and we ate heartily.

Although we were getting acquainted with the new group, which had two other seniors in their mid-forties – Anup and Bolin – they seemed to lack something: no walkie-talkies. Why? Later, I gathered that the intelligence and army were equipped with sophisticated gadgets to intercept radio communication. Even if communications were done in code, the smallest hint about our group's whereabouts and movements could jeopardize our safety.

But why were they carrying even more grenades and ammunition than usual? In addition, there were more weapons in two bamboo baskets bound with nylon cord. Had the situation changed? That was unlikely. What other reason could there be?

'So, tomorrow, where exactly will these boats take us?' I asked Pranab, and then repeated myself as he had his ear glued to the radio.

'The plan is to go slightly further upstream beyond the place where you boarded the boats during your inward journey. We'll hopefully get there before nightfall.'

'How is the overall situation now? Is there any danger anywhere?'

He looked at me, laughed and took a long sip of his green tea before replying. 'As usual. We will have to be alert 24 x 7. The reports are quite normal.'

'I just assumed that something was up because our escort group has expanded.'

‘A bigger group is always better because there is shortage of sakhans in the bastis during this season. Especially critical when we go through the valley where there are no villages.’

I was aware that we would not be told even if there was danger ahead. It made sense to be extra cautious because it was now known that two journalists were at large in the area. But then, would it be possible for me to click photographs on the way as I had been hoping for? I decided I would do so even if it invited danger, as this opportunity may not come again.

Then it was time to leave, and the motor boats roared, leaving a curling wake in the waters behind us. The speed was slower as we were moving upstream and the boats had to be carefully manoeuvred past the rocky outcrops that sometimes stretched almost halfway across the river from the banks.

It was evening by the time we stopped to pitch camp. From here, we would be able to cover the valley in two days if we maintained our speed. We did, and landed in the first village just after dark. The temperature had dipped and it was much colder in the hills than in the valley. Pranab instructed the cadres to fill up rations for a week and organize sakhans to carry the bags and baskets.

As we unpacked our sleeping bags, I saw something weird hanging on the bamboo wall of the hut. It felt like leather, but it wasn’t. It was two feet wide, twelve feet long and had a yellowish tinge with black stripes. The house owner, a bubbly old man who was standing by my side, said it was the skin of a python that had been killed two months ago.

‘I had gone hunting with my son and our dog,’ he told me. ‘After a while, we realized that the dog was missing, which was quite strange. We looked around and found that the poor thing’s head had been severed and swallowed by the snake that lay nearby. My son and I loaded our guns and shot the reptile from close quarters. It was extremely heavy, and we had to bring other people from the village to help us carry it home. It was chopped up and its meat distributed to the entire village.’

‘And you have kept the skin as a souvenir?’

‘No. I will try and sell it.’

‘Have you kept anything for us?’ asked Anup, who was cooking dinner.

‘Only the oil is left. It’s delicious and you can try some,’ replied the old man as he moved into the cottage.

He returned with a stained bottle of syrupy liquid. It was colourless and

tasted somewhat like butter when we mixed small quantities of it with rice. Pranab explained that pythons in eastern Nagaland were among the largest in the world, and sometimes grow up to more than twenty feet in length and weighed over 200 kg. What he said rang a bell. I remembered watching a documentary, which said the species was on the verge of extinction in Myanmar. They were hunted for their flesh and skin and their habitat was being depleted rapidly. Snakes never came our way during our long hike but, two days later, we noticed an exotic four-foot long tokay gecko atop a tree as we made our way downhill. It was making a sound, and one of our escorts in the group said the lizard was a delicacy that cured certain diseases. However, it could only be hunted for three months in a year. Although it resembled a miniature crocodile, it was harmless and shy, and vanished into the shrubs before I could take out my camera.

We crossed as many as five villages and two jungle hideouts over the next four days, covering almost double the distance over the same time during our inward journey. Pranab, after having had a discussion with the ranapiu and the headman of a village about the prevailing situation, decided to chart a different route. He explained to us that three nights would have to be spent at convenient locations in the hills wherever water was available. The change, he said, would greatly decrease the marching distance and land us straight into the Lainong Naga region. He would not say anything more about other possible factors behind the decision.

An advance party of three cadres went on ahead with two locals. They were to select a spot, prepare dinner and pitch the tents for us.

These three days were among the most tiring. The trek began before sunrise and continued until dark with fireflies lighting our way. On the third day, we crossed a hill at almost breakneck speed, because the Myanmarese army was known to frequent the area. We arrived at a village that once again was familiar to me. Pradip reminded us that it was here that we had found more dogs than humans. Only four dogs were to be seen now. Where did they all vanish? Either sold off, eaten or dead, somebody in the group explained.

We trudged on without a break until the captain called for an entire day's rest after two whole weeks. Rations would have to be replenished and security of the routes confirmed before the journey was resumed. Fatigued, we enquired about the distance remaining, and were informed that there was a distinct possibility of being able to step into Nagaland within a week if another of the short cuts we hoped to reach in a couple of days was free of

danger.

I relaxed and jotted down the highlights of the previous days in my diary and the interesting snippets that sometimes escaped my narratives. As I began writing, I realized that there were some more questions that could have been asked of Baruah. Three people had been shot dead years ago by ULFA on false charges: a journalist named Kamala Saikia in Sivasagar, a respected politician named Manabendra Sarma and a teenage girl in Nagaon. I could have also asked about the floods and erosion in Assam and ULFA's apparent passiveness on these issues, except for condemning the government for its failure to tackle them. Did ULFA have an alternative? Or did it intend to deal with them only after Assam's independence – just as it would deal with illegal immigration only after independence? The interview would have been a bit more interesting with answers to these queries. It was too late now.

However, we had several reasons to feel upbeat. The terrible knee pain that had nearly crippled me during our march at the beginning of our adventure was gone. This was a sure sign that I had acclimatized to the environment. The terrible damdim were lying low, perhaps unable to bear the cold weather, although a few intrepid ones still hung around to give us a few fresh sores. The ointment helped. But there was another vampire fly of a bigger variety and found only in the higher hills.

More fatal than these insects were the hornets, which terrorized us. A few thousands of these horrors descended from their nest in the tree on to anyone that dared to venture close to them. Escape was almost impossible and it was best to steer clear of these nests. Our advance party had a close shave once when they almost bumped into a giant nest that was hanging low, not far from the ground. The cadres retreated and waited for the other members to assemble. The nest, which was faintly visible, resembled a brown jute bag sculpted into an oblong shape. A few hornets were seen creeping in and out of the tiny chambers. We gave them wide berth and climbed a rise through the shrubs and eventually returned to the path several metres ahead. There were more nests on the way, but the locals had thoughtfully put up danger signs and usually there were chopped branches strategically strewn on the path as a warning.

Hazards sprang from unsuspecting corners in the hostile terrain. Once, while resting for a few moments beneath a tree, my left hand felt a jolt of electricity after brushing against a harmless-looking plant. I thought I had accidentally touched a high-voltage power line. My fingers went completely

numb as I examined the plant – I had touched only a few tiny thorns that lay camouflaged beneath a leaf. They were toxic and known as ‘current pat’ or ‘electric leaf’. There was no sensation in my fingers for a whole day. This plant was sometimes used for fencing the cultivated tracts in the hills to keep out wild animals. I immediately clicked a few photographs of the plant and carefully plucked two leaves with the khukri to keep as souvenirs.

Another danger during the monsoon was from rocks and big branches that hurtled down the mountains after storms and gales. I was under the impression that this phenomenon was peculiar to the hills where landslides took place. Anup recounted an incident in the region years ago when a young ULFA cadre was crushed by a boulder. As he lay trapped under the huge rock, writhing in pain, he begged his colleagues to shoot him. There were three men in the group, and one ran to the nearest village to fetch help. Despite the combined efforts of twenty people, the stone refused to budge, and, hours later, the boy died in agony.

Bears and leopards seeking prey also lurked in these areas. Small wonder that most Nagas who ventured out of the village moved in groups on certain stretches, carrying muzzle-loading guns along with the dao, the local machete. They were expert marksmen and just as effective with the dao. Every household had several guns, which were indigenously made using a complex process that had evolved over the past 200 years. During the time the British began to make forays into the Naga domain, hordes of Konyak tribesmen were armed with these guns to check the intrusion. They sniped and ambushed, giving the colonialists no opportunity to react and recoup. Eventually, the British gave up, withdrew and decided not to interfere.

Making guns has since become easier with the necessary components now brought from the western zone. Iron is smelted and sculpted, and bullets churned out by slicing small pieces of iron – large animals were known to drop dead if shot at from close range with these guns.

One afternoon, a hunter who sat down with us, narrated how the ‘powder’ can make all the difference to a gun. Lumps of earth, he said, were taken from the urinal, dried, crushed and mixed in proportion with other ingredients. Sometimes this is produced in large quantities and supplied to the entire basti. I asked him to load a bullet and allow me to fire. A small paper ball and a round bullet were pumped into the barrel using the slim iron rod that hung from the gun. It was ready. But wouldn’t this be just as capable of misfiring and fire backwards? I had heard weird tales from Bihar’s gun

factories. I took aim and pulled the trigger, and out went a chunk of fire into the canopy of the trees above. I asked him to pose with the gun for a photograph.

That same night, there was a hilarious incident in the village where we were staying. We had tucked ourselves into our sleeping bags around the fireplace in a hut where the father and son who owned the place were also seated, sipping the local brew. After a while, the latter retired to the inner room, and we were just about dozing off when I heard something strange. Chanting … by monks? But there were no monks around. The words were barely comprehensible … dug dug dik dik … dug dug dik dik … repeated over and over again. It was the father, who was still seated in a corner and continuing to drink. He was very drunk and seemed to be trying to sing a song of some sort, I thought, but I was wrong. Suddenly, there was a scream from the other room. It was the son, who then came out brandishing a dao, intent on slaughtering his singing sire. It came out later that the father had mocked the son about something that had infuriated him. Some women appeared and grabbed the young man and restrained him while one hurried out of the cottage for help. Anup and Bolin, who were sleeping beside us, flashed their pistols and positioned themselves by the door. Before long, the ranapiu arrived with four young lads who hauled the son out and tied him to a stake outside, where he remained all night. We were moved into a less exciting household that night, and the father continued to enjoy his brew.

Two days later, we were baffled to find a welcome party at the entrance of the village, which we were about to enter in the evening. There was no reason to welcome us. As we walked past the cheering crowd, we realized that the gathering was in honour of the local football team that had finished champions in a tournament. I positioned myself with the camera and chatted with the headman. He explained that the contest was an annual feature held between ten villages. The excitement was because his basti had defeated its rival and neighbour, who had won the prize last year. A teenager with a guitar burst into song. At a distance, I saw the triumphant team approaching up the hill, bearing the trophy and the village flag. The crowd cheered and surged forward to receive them and returned with the captain and some of the players on their shoulders.

Shortly afterwards, the headman ordered a feast for the next day in which the rival team would also participate. What a change, I thought, from the days of headhunting when each village's success was measured by the number of

heads taken from their neighbours. Unity and friendship had now replaced these customs. This was no mean achievement – the credit goes to GPRN, I believe. Four pigs were to be slaughtered for the celebrations the next day. A few boys were commissioned to catch fish from the river early the next morning. The village would be cleaned and decorated. Although we were also invited to stay and attend their programme, we were scheduled to leave early.

Meanwhile, Pranab had received the green signal to use another short cut. If all went well, we should be able to reach Nagaland within three days, he said. Pradip and I were overjoyed. I wondered why we hadn't used this route during the inward journey. Perhaps it had been blocked or was considered unsafe for newcomers. Now, provided nothing went wrong over the next couple of days, we would complete the return trek in seventeen days flat. However, Pranab warned us about a patch that was rocky and steep, although it would perhaps be the last such stretch before the end of our journey. 'This is an underground path not usually used by others,' he informed us. 'But nothing to worry about. We cross such places regularly in the north and you will also be able to make it.'

My heart skipped a beat when I saw the cliff from an adjacent hill after a day's trek. It was not only almost vertical but appeared to be slippery as well.

Fortunately, it was not as vertical as it had seemed from afar. The climb would be approximately 50 metres and there were uneven surfaces all over that would provide convenient footholds. It may not be hazardous for an ULFA cadre or a Naga, but most certainly risky for rookie mountaineers like us. The same technique that we had used on the very first day when we negotiated a similar patch was applied. I positioned myself in the middle of the squad and climbed up slowly holding Bolin's hand. I had learnt to place my feet on the exact same spots that he had used and we moved up gradually. Every step required enormous effort, and soon I was gasping for breath. Seeing my condition, Pranab, who was behind us, shouted and exhorted me not to halt. But I could not sustain the continuous climb, and stopped for a few seconds at a point where the cliff had a horizontal contour. The three people above me kept inching ahead. Before long, we had arrived at the summit. The path beyond was even and led us straight to the village ahead.

I lay flat on the grass for some time and did not want to get up. But Pranab said something that made me jump up and resume the march. Pointing in the

northern direction, he asked, ‘Do you see that hill? That is the western zone and the place where you will be headed tomorrow.’

‘Do you mean to say we have arrived?”

‘Almost, and it’s only one day more for you. But we must reach our destination today before dark. We will have to organize another team that will take you to the final point because we can’t proceed beyond this village.’

We arrived at the village that seemed to be the largest we had set foot in so far. The difference in the standard of living from the Nagas in the interior regions was striking. Rock music thundered from a house, which was decorated for a celebration of some sort. The ranapiu showed us to a hut where we unpacked for the night and began discussing the trek that we were to undertake the following day. Pradip and I felt that if we were apprehended, Assam Rifles would seize our cameras and recorder, so it would probably be better not to carry these with us. A vehicle would also have to be kept on standby at a convenient location, ready to take us to the nearest town.

Pranab and Bolin returned an hour later after speaking to the NSCN(K) cadres. They informed us that a jeep had been arranged to pick us up from a designated spot. We were, however, unnerved by the plan they outlined to us.

‘You will reach a village very close to an Assam Rifles establishment. So you will have to wait for the right opportunity before jumping on to the vehicle,’ Pranab
told us.

‘But what if we are apprehended by them?’ I asked. ‘Of course, it is unlikely that such a thing should happen, but I think it would be best if you could make arrangements for our equipment to be delivered to us through a different route.’

‘Yes, we can do that and it should not take more than two days if you are based at a location nearby,’ Pranab said, asking us to leave our address and phone numbers. Five locals would carry our bags and escort us from the basti, he added.

I realized that the media would pounce on us the moment they heard we had returned. I conferred with Pradip and decided to head for Duliajan in Upper Assam, and wait there for the camera and recorder and then head home. I would also be able to utilize the time to submit the stories for my newspaper and finish the assignment. Pranab agreed. We were to leave early the next

morning – before daybreak – so as to reach the destination by afternoon.

There was a slight delay, and it was 5 a.m. by the time we ate our last morsel with the cadres. Our cameras and recorder were put in a separate bag, which would be left behind with Pranab. I took the two memory cards and carefully hid them in my jacket collar. Shortly afterwards, we embraced all the cadres for the last time and began the march with the new group, led by Ahon, a man in his thirties. Four boys moved slightly ahead of us with the bags. Our goal was to reach a village before 1 p.m. and then hop on to the waiting jeep. The trek was the smoothest so far in the entire journey. The path was wide and freshly sculpted on the side of the hill. Ahon said that a plan was under way to build a concrete road soon.

The village came into view at 11 a.m. Ahon urged us to increase our pace. But the track soon gave way to a narrow rocky path that snaked up in a gradual ascent. We realized we would be late by an hour or so. Our concern was that if the vehicle was on the road for a long time, it would arouse suspicion. Ahon shouted to the boys ahead of us to stop, and when he caught up with them, they were instructed to go on ahead and inform the driver about the delay. He was to leave for a safer location, and then return an hour later to fetch us.

We finally stepped into the village at 3 p.m. and were taken to a hut up some winding stairs. A motorable road was visible up on the hill about 100 metres ahead, but the vehicle had not arrived and one of the boys from our group was still waiting on the road. There were no Assam Rifles personnel either, although their office was also visible. The host was sipping the local brew with his friends. Pradip and I decided to have some, for the last time, and slipped a twenty-rupee note into his pocket. He pulled out a fresh bamboo jar, poured hot water into it, and pushed it towards us. It tasted less sour than the variety we had drunk earlier, but it clearly had higher alcohol content.

I was inebriated after half an hour and leant on a wooden post, shut my eyes and reflected on the journey that we were able to accomplish. Did I learn anything new? Were there lessons to be drawn? Yes, I suppose so, quite a few. The first was that happiness was inversely proportional to needs and directly proportional to the capacity to accept the realities of life. The more the need, the less the happiness, and this was quite apparent with the lifestyle of the people of eastern Nagaland. I couldn't help but think that they were a happier lot, even as they made do with much less of everything than us. They

were tortured and tormented, but they bounced back each time with the gusto to resume their lives.

Their daily lives also proved that physical labour and boiled food were the antidotes to many ills that afflict the human body. I don't remember seeing any Naga who was bulky or inactive. Even the opium addicts were full of life; they walked faster and carried heavier loads than we could – and with such enviable ease.

Also, change is inevitable, as philosophers and social scientists have said. Sometimes they are induced and sometimes they take place without conscious effort. The transformation in this region was the result of both and there were bound to be greater changes in times to come. With many nations competing to draw closer to Myanmar, it was natural that this region would be opened up in the near future and its natural resources exploited with irreversible consequences.

Most importantly, confidence and a positive attitude are the keys to success, not only in professional pursuits but in all else as well. There were times during the journey when we were crestfallen and uncertain. Especially when we were holed up in a village only two days into the trail. But something kept telling me that we would march on and return home, triumphant despite the hurdles, and I had begun to envisage my stories being published – with photographs – in our newspaper and other dailies. I had also begun fantasizing about the compliments I would receive after reaching home. Long ago, I had read that thoughts were energy and they were converted into matter or reality faster if they were also reflected in one's words and actions. In fact, before our departure from the ULFA camp, I had begun to tell the inmates about the stories that would be published and about the travelogue that is now in place. For now though, I only imagine myself to have safely crossed the border, riding a car into Duliajan with a crate of chilled Golden Eagle beer.

I thought I would fall asleep if I remained in that position for long, so I opened my eyes and watched Pradip chatting with the host and his friend. Both wore tattered hats. I remembered promising my hat to John, who had accompanied us to the village where we stayed for the night preceding our entry into eastern Nagaland. But how would that be possible now? This village was further north and quite a distance away from John's place because we had returned by a different route. I felt sad, as I wouldn't be able to keep my promise, at least for now. Sending the hat to him could be

possible only if I find somebody going from Guwahati to where he lived. I would have to bear this in mind.

I then ventured out to the courtyard for a better glimpse of the village that seemed to be the cleanest Naga basti I had seen so far in eastern Nagaland. There was a distinct difference in the standard of living here, perhaps because it was close to the border.

After an hour, the boy who was standing on the road came running up to inform us that the jeep had arrived. Our bags were loaded first and then we made a dash for the vehicle after shaking hands with the host, Ahon and the boys. The driver was told to find a taxi for us to go to Duliajan. We sped along the highway to the nearest town.

Pradip and I congratulated each other. 'We finally did it. Home is the hunter, home from the hill, and the sailor, home from the sea. Three cheers to us!'

'And the journalists are home from the journey,' I said.

'How many days did it take in all?'

'Today is 30 January 2012. Exactly three months and twenty days.'

I glanced back to take in eastern Nagaland for the last time, with reverence and gratitude. Perhaps we would return some day. The adventure and the pristine purity of the place were intensely compelling, and we would not have wanted to miss any of it. After a bend in the hilly trail, the blue hills disappeared.

Epilogue

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I received the gadgets I had left behind with the ULFA cadre at Duliajan after six days. A text message from ULFA gave me a code word and instructed me to send a trusted aide to a shop on the interstate border, which was about an hour's drive from where we were staying. The caller was of the view that my movements would be tracked, and it could be dangerous for me to pick up the items myself. A friend I had deputed for the task delivered the equipment in the evening.

And I finally reached home, Guwahati, on 8 February. Needless to say, everybody was waiting for me eagerly – both at home and elsewhere. I had changed; I was thinner, with a shaggy beard now. There were so many stories to tell. I repeated them to everyone I met, showed them photographs, and answered the many questions regarding the misinformation about our detention and abduction.

Pradip went on TV after my series of stories was published in *Seven Sisters Post* and a few vernacular dailies. We were both, again, on the screens for a few days. Sharp reactions began to pour in from different quarters, particularly on the estimates I had given about the number of cadres with Baruah in eastern Nagaland. Some said it was erroneous, while others described it as a 'drama' staged before us by the chief to prove his strength. Still others contended that we had undertaken the long journey only to create a positive image for the underground faction and throw a spanner in the ongoing talks between the group led by Chairman Rajkhowa and the government.

There was no denying the fact that fresh recruits had landed in the eastern zone and were receiving training, however debatable their numbers might be. ULFA's camps were intact, as were those of other rebel groups in the region. Khaplang confirmed what had long been suspected about the understanding between his outfit and the Myanmarese army. He seemed to have firmed up other plans as well, which had not been revealed to us.

Then, on 9 April 2012, two months after our return, NSCN(K) concluded a written agreement with the Myanmarese army that formalized the ceasefire between the two sides. A senior NSCN(K) functionary from India, one of the six signatories to the agreement, was quoted by the media as saying that

autonomy had been granted by the government in Lahe, Layse and Nanyang in eastern Nagaland.[1] Khaplang also sent a delegation to New Delhi for a similar pact after his rival faction, led by Khole Konyak and N. Kitovi Zhimomi, did the same with the Indian government. Subsequently, the Naga chief also sent delegates to Thailand to participate in a conference aimed at reconciliation among the different militant factions in Nagaland. Earlier, his adversaries had accused him of being opposed to efforts at forging unity.

So, was Khaplang preparing for dialogue with the Indian and Myanmarese governments? He said he was opposed to this because it would mean compromising on sovereignty. However, it was possible that he had realized independence may not be feasible, and he might as well begin the process of shaping the contours of peaceful coexistence with the Myanmarese government.

It is perhaps too early to gauge his actual motives, but the rationale behind these agreements could have been to avoid clashes with the armies on both sides. Collection of taxes and free movement of cadres were hampered because of the lack of a formal agreement with the government.

The pact with New Delhi too would undoubtedly offer a respite to NSCN(K). The government would not engage Khaplang in peace talks since dialogue was on with the NSCN(IM). The Khole–Kitovi faction could also take umbrage if a Myanmar-based rebel chief were accorded priority by the government. There was no immediate danger from Naypyidaw either, because it would like the peace with NSCN(K) to continue.

Nonetheless, much would also depend on whether or not Myanmar managed to resist India's increasing pressure for a flushout operation against the rebels. Ties between the two neighbours have warmed after the Myanmarese president, Thein Sein, landed in New Delhi in October 2011 and the return visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2012. Chief of staff, General Min Aung Hlaing, was granted the honour of calling on the Indian president, although the privilege was normally only given to heads of state. India has also earmarked $25 million for schools and hospitals in Myanmar's Sagaing Division, which overlapped with a part of the region under Khaplang's control.[2]

New Delhi is bound to continue the bonhomie with Myanmar, whether or not action is initiated against the rebel camps. It has no option. The gas and oil reserves in Myanmar are crucial for India's expanding economy. Success of the Look East Policy, which aimed at forging closer ties with South-East

Asia, hinge on Myanmar's cooperation. Above all, cultivating friendship with Myanmar could check China's increasing advances and hold over the neighbouring country.

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Though the United Front of the north-east militants was founded amidst great expectations in eastern Nagaland, it suffered a jolt when the Manipur-based United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK) was expelled from the forum early in 2013. A few months later, the rebel group signed a ceasefire pact with the Manipur government. The group was also part of the Coordination Committee (Cor Comm) of seven outfits from the same state that had come into being in 2010. Citing reasons for the decision, media coordinator of Cor Comm, H. Poirei, announced that senior functionaries of UPPK, including Chairman Laangamba, had not been attending meetings over the past several months. Internal dissension had also taken a heavy toll of the group that made it 'unfit' to remain as a member of the Cor Comm. This incident punched a gaping hole in the alliance, and there was the grave risk of leaks of vital information about future plans and details about the camps going out to the government.

It is not yet certain if the United Front has been able to enrol groups from the other states of the north-east. And outfits in Tripura and Meghalaya continue to be on the back foot from the counter-insurgency operations by security forces. Baruah claimed that a new organization that was part of the joint forum had come into being in Arunachal Pradesh. In 2012, police revealed the formation of a new outfit in the border state named United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), led by Sumona Munglang, who had reportedly worked in Mumbai for the underworld don Dawood Ibrahim. However, its objective, as officials claimed, was the creation of an autonomous district council in the border state rather than fighting for the state's sovereignty.

A great setback for ULFA was the decision by Bijoy 'Chinese' Das to come overground in February 2013 and the awarding of capital punishment to Partha Gogoi a year later. Both were, supposedly, hardliners and members of the newly constituted executive council. Gogoi was, reportedly, planning to join the pro-talks group of ULFA headed by Chairman Rajkhowa, when the order to eliminate him while at a hideout in eastern Nagaland close to the border was issued.

We had spent close to three weeks with Das and Gogoi in the camp, but

never did they give the impression that they would change their stance some day and cross the border. They had earned Baruah's trust, and were veterans of many a deadly operation. In fact, Gogoi was made commander of the eastern zone after Bijoy's exit. The anti-talks group alleged that Gogoi had siphoned off huge funds and his game plan was to make other functionaries surrender as well. The actual reasons for his reneging from the hard-line faction were hazy, although some said that both men had personal motives to take the critical decision. Whatever the case, these incidents once again put a big question mark over the motivation levels of the ULFA cadres.

Another critical development was the awarding of the death penalty to Paresh Baruah, along with thirteen others including two former ministers, by a special court in Bangladesh on 30 January 2014 in connection with an arms haul in Chittagong in 2004. In all probability, Baruah would have returned to Bangladesh had the BNP managed to win the elections. Now, with the judgment against them, it is doubtful if he will ever set foot in that country again. He would prefer not to compromise the safety of his friends or embarrass them in any way.

But would that impede ULFA's activities in Bangladesh or its future plans? Over the past two decades or so, ULFA had successfully carved out a massive network in Bangladesh, involving politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, which was evident from the high-profile personalities convicted in the case. The base in the neighbouring country helped the chief to arrange reliable avenues for funds, to strike arms deals and also to campaign for Assam's independence at international forums. In addition, he has been able to interact closely with a section of the ISI and DGFI that were entrusted to assist the outfit.

These activities are unlikely to grind to a halt even if Baruah fails to show up in Bangladesh. For one, transfer of funds to other destinations does not require Baruah's presence in the country. Like some Manipuri groups, ULFA still has several hideouts and cadres stationed in Bangladesh. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that the Awami League–led government has been and is keener to settle scores with its political rivals than to wipe out the north-east rebels from its soil. It is not expected to go hunting for militants beyond a certain point, because some of its demands have not been accepted by India yet. Also, the extradition of ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia, which was expected to provide a boost to the ongoing peace process (between the centre and pro-talks ULFA), seems to have run aground, and nobody knows the

precise reason why he is still in jail in Dhaka along with two other cadres.

Weapons can still be purchased in Bangladesh, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to transfer large quantities across the border. Fencing has come up along a large stretch and the Border Security Force (BSF) in India is now equipped with sophisticated surveillance gadgets. Earlier, consignments were taken through circuitous routes into the north-east, and these were sometimes seized by security forces. Supply into the region from China and bases in Myanmar is much cheaper and easier now. And what's more, the Indo-Myanmar border is porous with scant deployment of security forces, and the free-border regime allows the border population to travel up to a distance of 16 kilometres on either side.

Baruah's movements had already been curtailed after the red corner notice by Interpol. He occasionally travelled from Dhaka, on a Bangladeshi passport, to only two countries, either for meetings or for arms deals. He will still be able to do that because both countries are hostile to India. Now, he will most likely be compelled to fall back on the base in Myanmar and strengthen ties with other like-minded groups in the region and agencies sympathetic to the cause. He reiterated that talks with the Indian government would be possible only if sovereignty of Assam (and now the north-east) was accepted as the core issue. The government has repeatedly turned down the demand, even though it has never ruled out a dialogue with the chief. Then again, in view of the Bangladesh verdict, it is highly doubtful if New Delhi will express a desire for talks with him again. The Indian government would not like to be seen talking to a rebel leader, who is a wanted man in a neighbouring country – a country with which cordial relations were, and are, deemed necessary for commercial and strategic interests.

In the other camp, there is hope that an accord with the Centre, after months of hectic negotiations, is around the corner. But Chairman Rajkhowa warned that his group might walk out of the talks if the Centre engages in delaying tactics.[3] The peace processes with militant outfits in India have usually been long-drawn and unpredictable. Some have dragged on for years before a settlement was hammered out. Some were broken only to be resumed years later as had happened with the MNF in Mizoram. However, the government can ignore the alarming situation in Assam only at its own peril. It is the heart of the north-east, and instability in this state will rock the surrounding hills as well.

Insurgency-related incidents in the north-east have registered a sharp

decline over the past few years, although many rebel groups, whose ideologies ranged from secessionism to banditry, continue to survive. In many areas, only some insurgent outfits had fizzled out, but not insurgency. The hill districts in Assam – Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao – where new groups have been emerging at regular intervals, are cases in point. Evidently, the factors that fuel insurgency continue to exist and the government's strategy, which focuses on ceasefire agreements, dialogue and accord, is in need of review. But despite the deficiencies in its approach, the government has the advantage of unlimited resources and it can continue battling these movements sine die. For militant outfits, fatigue sets in after some time and only the highly motivated can be expected to continue with the harsh life in the jungles. Their support base also dwindles over time because civilians cannot endure the hardship and agony of operations by security forces for an indefinite period.

Perhaps ULFA was alluding to a realistic scenario when its newly appointed acting chairman, Dr Avijit Barman, said in the email interview that it would not be possible for the outfit to militarily defeat the Indian armed forces. Had it unleashed a different strategy to achieve its goals then? In the same interview, Barman said that India could be preparing for a 'limited war' with China and, whenever that breaks out, it would be a 'golden chance to kick India out of Assam'. Baruah had said as much in an informal chat, referring to the role likely to be played by the US in provoking a war between the two neighbours. Top functionaries of other groups based in eastern Nagaland also held the unwavering view that India and China were heading for a showdown, which would result in a war within a few years.

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One of the strangest incidents in my life took place about a month after I resumed working. I was congratulated by the management for completing the assignment well, and it even offered to send me on a vacation to Europe. Only a few weeks later, I was suspended for an indefinite period. The charge against me was that I had given publicity to banned insurgent outfits and had used the office vehicle to ferry two ULFA cadres when I travelled back home from Duliajan. The management said that the incident had come to the notice of the government and the company had been warned with dire consequences. The truth is that the two men who rode home with us were Duliajan locals – called Chandan Handique and Ajay Sahni – whom I knew for a long time. They have never been associated with ULFA. They were also on their way to

Guwahati when I invited them to accompany us. The story was that simple. Fortunately, I was able to establish that the allegations were false and I was back in office after three weeks.

More ominous was the conspiracy. It transpired that my detractors were frustrated to see me back in office, and had convinced a highly placed government official to speak to the management of our daily to sack me. It was obvious that they were afraid that I would expose them and call their bluff; therefore they wanted to eliminate the danger and remove me from the daily permanently. Even as this plot fizzled out, another was set in motion.

This time, a complaint was submitted against me at the office of the national security advisor, and perhaps also the National Investigation Agency (NIA), citing baseless allegations. A case was sought to be made that I had made arrangements to transfer huge amounts of funds from my employer to ULFA, and that the money would be utilized for the purchase of a consignment of weapons. An intelligence agency was asked to probe the charges that were subsequently found to be false. Amazingly, senior government officials were even told that I had joined ULFA and was advising Baruah, who was in regular touch with me. Once again, nothing was found to corroborate the charges.

Two months later, I was promoted to managing editor of the daily. However, the responsibility came with the rider that I was not to go to any militant camp without approval from the management. I was also asked to abstain from entering any country without valid documents.

Nonetheless, I had made up my mind to not pay heed to these sermons or warnings. I had firmed up plans to visit a camp of the PLA in the southern zone of eastern Nagaland on its Raising Day on 25 September. It was only a three-day walk from the border at Chandel in Manipur.

But the programme was scuttled at the eleventh hour even as I was making last-minute preparations. A message from a top functionary of the outfit advised me not to embark on the trip as the situation was not conducive. Surely, something had suddenly gone wrong. I was disappointed, because such assignments knock on one's door only occasionally. There was a high possibility that I would have met and interviewed the PLA commander-in-chief, Manohar Mayum, if I had made the trip.

Still, whenever I recall eastern Nagaland, I feel an adrenalin rush. I cannot wait to walk those roads again. Another rendezvous with the rebels calls.

Endnotes

Chapter 1

1. Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 'Talking ceasefire now is like putting the cart before the horse', *The Indian Express*, 25 September 2006.
2. 'No Discussions with Pre-Conditions', Times Now, 11 December 2009.

Chapter 2

1. For more details, see J.D. Saul, *The Naga in Burma: Their Festivals, Customs and Way of Life*, Bangkok, Orchid Press, 2005.
2. Many authors and reports have termed Naga villages as 'republics' or 'little republics'. See, for instance, *Report of the Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task in Land Reforms*, Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2009, p. 10.
3. Interview with NSCN(K) cadres, eastern Nagaland, 18–30 October 2011.
4. Pangmi denotes a group of Naga tribes with similar customs and dialects. It meant only the Hemi and Rangpang tribes when the concept came into being decades ago. Senior NSCN(K) functionaries have however revealed that more tribes like Tangsa (in Arunachal Pradesh) and Tangnu have also been included now.

Chapter 3

1. For more details, see Andrew Martin, *Flight By Elephant: The Untold Story of World War II's Most Daring Jungle Rescue,* London, Fourth Estate, 2013.
2. Pankaj Kumar Sharma, 'Paresh to use other outfits: Forces Hunt on to arrest bomb experts', *The Telegraph*, 21 March 2011.
3. Interview with a PLA commander, Imphal, 24 September 2007 and interview with ULFA cadres between 2007 and 2010 at various places in Assam. Besides these two outfits, a small batch of the Kuki National Army (KNA) of Manipur was also trained by the KIA, according to senior cadres of the outfit.
4. Interview with a retired joint secretary of Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW) and Kachin refugees, New Delhi, between June and September 2006.
5. Interview with former ULFA staff officer, Lohit Deuri, Guwahati, 20 January 2011.
6. For more details on the conflict in Kachin, see Paul Keenan, *By Force of Arms: Armed Ethnic Groups in Burma*, Chiang Mai, Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2012. Also see, Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 1993, for the origin of the conflict in Kachin and other regions in Myanmar.
7. Paul Keenan, *By Force of Arms: Armed Ethnic Groups in Burma*, Chiang Mai, Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2012, p. 147.
8. There are varying estimates of the number of cadres under UNLF. There were more than 3,000 cadres according to a UNLF commander interviewed by the author in Imphal on 4 August 2008, but senior police officials in Manipur are of the view that its strength is around 2,500.
9. This valley is part of Indo-Burma (Myanmar) Biodiversity Hotspot which is one of the top ten

ecologically fragile zones in the world. This hotspot also includes all non-marine parts of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and parts of southern China.

Chapter 4

1. Interview with a retired additional secretary of Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), Guwahati, 15 December 2010.

Chapter 5

1. In reply to an unstarred question in Rajya Sabha on 9 March 2011, minister of state for home affairs, Mullapally Ramachandran, admitted that the north-east rebels procured weapons from China which was reported in *The Assam Tribune*, 10 March 2011. Occasionally, media reports and articles have also highlighted the phenomenon. See Sandeep Unnithan, 'Gunrunners of North-East', *India Today*, 6 June 2011, and Anupam Dasgupta, 'External Affair', *The Week*, 21 November 2012. For more details, see Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 'Small Arms Proliferation in the Northeast: The Chinese Connection', *Aakrosh*, October 2010, Volume 13, No. 49.
2. Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2012, pp. 344–45.
3. Davis, 'Law and Disorder: A Growing Torrent of Guns and Narcotics Overwhelms China', *Asia Week*, 25 August 1995.
4. Interview with a retired joint secretary of Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), New Delhi, 5 December 2006.
5. Interview with a surrendered ULFA cadre who was trained in Kachin, Guwahati, 2 January 2008.
6. Interview with Kachin refugees, New Delhi, June–September 2006.
7. Interview with senior functionaries of United Kuki Liberation Front, Chandel, Manipur, 22 September 2007.
8. Liana Sun Wyler, 'Transnational Crime in Burma', CRS Report for Congress, 29 July 2008.
9. Interview with DHD militants, Harangajao, 31 January 2008.
10. Interview with UPDS militants, Karbi Anglong, 4 February 2008.
11. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000, p. 135.
12. Interview with surrendered militants who were present at ULFA's general headquarters (GHQ) at Lakhipathar, Dibrugarh, 27 May 2010.
13. Jaideep Saikia, 'Autumn in Springtime: The ULFA Battles for Survival', *Faultlines*, Volume 7, 2000.
14. It is difficult to quantify the total number of people murdered by secret killers. The S.N. Saikia Commission probed thirty-five cases and arrived at the conclusion that the SULFA (Surrendered ULFA), army and police were involved in these acts.
15. Interview with surrendered ULFA cadres, Guwahati, 10 March 2010.
16. Sunil Nath, 'The Secessionist Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds', *Faultlines*, Volume 13, 2002.
17. Interview with ULFA foreign secretary, Shashadhar Choudhury (Pro Talks), Guwahati, 4 November 2012 (also published in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume VII, Issue 2, April 2013).
18. Interview with UNLF chairman, Rajkumar Meghen, at the NIA court premises, Guwahati, 26 September 2011.
19. M.R. Narayan Swamy, *Inside an Elusive Mind: Prabhakaran*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2003, pp. 94–95.
20. Interview with former ULFA publicity secretary, Ruby Bhuyan, Guwahati, 12 March 2011.
21. Interview with surrendered cadres who were based in Bangladesh, Nalbari, 28 July 2011.
22. Interview with a former ULFA district commander, Nagaon, 4 October 2007.

23. Interview with surrendered ULFA cadres, Nalbari, 24 June 2011.
24. Interview with surrendered ULFA cadres who were stationed at the Lakhipathar camp, Dibrugarh, 4 January 2008.
25. Interview with surrendered ULFA cadres, Guwahati and Nalbari, August–December 2010.
26. Interview with former ULFA publicity secretary, Ruby Bhuyan, Guwahati, 12 March 2011, and interview with ULFA (Pro Talks) chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Guwahati, 20 November 2012.
27. Interview with ULFA foreign secretary, Shashadhar Choudhury (Pro Talks), Guwahati, 4 November 2012.
28. Assam chief minister, Tarun Gogoi's speech at the meeting of National Development Council, New Delhi, 27 December 2012.
29. Interview with former ULFA staff officer Luhit Deuri, Guwahati, 20 January 2011, and interview with former ULFA commander of 28 Battalion, Mrinal Hazarika, Guwahati, 26 May 2011.
30. Interview with former ULFA foreign secretary, Munin Nabis, Guwahati, 9 March 2010.
31. Interview with former ULFA commander of 28 Battalion's A Company, Jiten Dutta, Guwahati, 14 July 2011, and interview with former ULFA commander of 28 Battalion, Mrinal Hazarika, Guwahati, 26 May 2011.

Chapter 6

1. Daimary obtained bail in Guwahati on 23 June 2013 for all the fourteen cases in which he had been an accused. The government did not oppose his bail plea after he expressed willingness to engage in peace talks for a settlement.

Chapter 7

1. There are several accounts of the frontier region by colonial administrators. See Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, and Sir Robert Reid's *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam From 1883–1941*, Government Assam Press, Shillong, 1942.
2. Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2002, p. 21.
3. For details of the separatist movement in Nagaland, see M. Horam, *Naga Insurgency: The Last Thirty Years*, New Delhi, Cosmo Publications, 1988.
4. Interview with NSCN (K) chairman, S.S. Khaplang, eastern Nagaland, 23–24 December 2011.
5. A Report by the Naga Youth Organisation (Burma), *Life Under Military Rule: Human Rights Violations of Nagas in Burma*, Naga Youth Organisation (Burma), 2010, p. 25.
6. Interview with NSCN(K) chairman S.S. Khaplang, eastern Nagaland, 23–24 December 2011.
7. Ibid.
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Chapter 8

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List of Abbreviations

AfPak	Afghanistan Pakistan
ATTF	All Tripura Tiger Force
Cor Com	Coordination Committee
DGFI	Directorate General of Forces Intelligence
ENNC	Eastern Naga National Council
ENRC	Eastern Naga Revolutionary Council
GNLA	Garo National Liberation Army
GPRN	Government of People's Republic of Nagaland
IBRF	Indo Burma Revolutionary Front
ISI	Inter Services Intelligence
KCP	Kangleipak Communist Party
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KLO	Kamatapur Liberation Organization
KYKL	Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup
MNF	Mizo National Front
MPLF	Manipur People's Liberation Front
NCCC	Naga Cultural Centre Committee
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NHRDP	Naga Hills Regional Development Party
NNC	Naga National Convention (in eastern Nagaland)
NNC	Naga National Council (in Nagaland)
NDF	National Defence Force
NLFT	National Liberation Front of Tripura
NSCN(IM)	National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah)
NSCN(K)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)
NSCN(U)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Unification)
OIL	Oil India Limited
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Commission
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PREPAK	People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
R&AW	Research and Analysis Wing

UFSEAHR	United Front of South East Asian Himalayan Region
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations Peoples' Organization
UPPK	United People's Party of Kangleipak

Select Glossary

Akhuni	fermented beans
Ang	village chief
Asanas	postures in yoga
Bidi	local cheroot
Bihu	a festival in Assam
Bodo	a tribe in Assam
Dal	lentils
Damdim	a bloodsucking insect
Dao	machete
Dhol	a percussion instrument like a drum
Gamusa	a piece of cloth used as a scarf and for other purposes, e.g., as a bath towel
Husori	song of the Bihu festival in Assam
Jhum	shifting cultivation
Kani	opium
Khiamniungan	a Naga tribe
Khukri	machete manufactured in Nepal
Kilonser	minister
Konyak	a Nagas tribe
Kuttapuk	a bloodsucking insect
Lainong	a Nagas tribe
Longyi	a piece of cloth worn below the waist
Manimuni	a herb
Masundari	a herb
Meitei	Hindu community in Manipur
Mejenga	leaves of a tree, also called mejenga
Morung	dormitory
Mokhlong	a disease whose symptoms are similar to cerebral malaria
Nagasmese	a pidgin of Assamese and Hindi
Namaskar	greeting by hands pressed together, palms touching and fingers

	pointing upwards, thumbs close to the chest
Naypyidaw	new capital of Myanmar
Ojas	the group of nineteen members of People's Liberation Army (of Manipur) who were trained by the Chinese army in Tibet
Pangmi (also Pangmei)	a group of Nagas tribes
Rajapiu	official of NSCN(K) above the Ranapiu
Ranapiu	official of NSCN(K) stationed in the villages
Sakhan	porter
Sema	a Nagas tribe
Tangsa	a Nagas tribe
Toko	a tree that resembles a palm tree, with decorative-looking drooping leaves, which are used to thatch a hut

About the Author

RAJEEV BHATTACHARYYA is the author of *Lens and the Guerrilla: Insurgency in India's Northeast*, the first pictorial book on insurgency in India. He is a freelance journalist based in Guwahati and had earlier worked for *The Times of India*, *The Telegraph*, *The Indian Express* and Times Now. In 2004, he was selected for the Chevening Fellowship in the UK where he studied the peace process between the British government and the Irish Republican Army. He was the founding executive editor of *Seven Sisters Post* in Guwahati. Besides contributing regularly to academic journals on issues ranging from conflicts to the deteriorating natural environment in the north-east, he also lectures in reputed institutes.

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